

century, however, agreement has emerged as to the root principles that should guide the West's land and resources. These are not just my, or any single group's, ideas but rather are broadly stated precepts—a mix of national policies, local prerogatives, market economics, social concerns, and environmental protection—held by most people concerned with the American West. The shared set of values encompasses these ideas:

1. Sustainable development should be employed so that resources will be available in sufficient quantity and quality for future generations.
2. Roughly equal respect should be given to the traditional extractive uses and to the more recently conceived nonconsumptive uses. Wildlife, recreation, and wilderness are “resources”—they, too, are a supply of something valuable.
3. Resource development should be conducted in a relatively level, consistent way in order to promote and preserve healthy, stable, and lasting communities.
4. Federal and state governments usually ought to receive a fair return when their resources are developed.
5. Government subsidies should be given to private industry only sparingly and under compelling, well-documented circumstances.

Stated even more broadly, a consensus exists that western resources generally ought to be developed but that development ought to be balanced and prudent, with precautions taken to ensure sustainability, to protect health, to recognize environmental values, to fulfill community values, and to provide a fair return to the public.

These principles have broad acceptance, but development in the West does not proceed in accordance with them. Rather, westwide, natural resource policy is dominated by the lords of yesterday, a battery of nineteenth-century laws, policies, and ideas that arose under wholly different social and economic conditions but that remain in effect due to inertia, powerful lobbying forces, and lack of public awareness.

The lords of yesterday trace to one of the extraordinary eras in all of history, the American westward movement of the nineteenth century. Initially, the mountains, heat, and scarcity of water and the sheer distance of travel across the Great Plains were daunting impediments to settlement. So too was Indian opposition. Nevertheless, as historian Walter Prescott Webb accurately observed, the American West, as compared with frontiers in other parts of the world, had an essential simplicity to its expansionist policy.

The absence of the military, the proximity of the new land to the old, the ease of migration, and the absence of any attempt on the part of the government to regulate or control the process made the American situation the last word in simplicity. . . .<sup>14</sup>

The crucial ingredient in Webb's formulation was the *laissez-faire* policy of both the federal and state governments. The West held an array of natural goods that could support settlement of the region, boost the national economy, and assist mightily in establishing the young nation's place in the international trade community. The chosen means to achieve those ends was for the federal and state governments to open the gates, step back, and allow American ingenuity to take over. There was no commonly perceived need for any environmental policy. A recent survey, for example, named John Muir as the greatest Californian in history, but for most of his career (he died in 1914) Muir's brilliant philosophical ruminations over the value of wild places to humanity were sustenance for only a small group of followers. Westerners cared about the intangible products of their land but took them for granted because they were so abundant. Environmental constraints played at most a marginal role in the making of western public policy during the nineteenth century. The main thrust was to transfer public resources into private hands on a wholesale basis in order to conquer nature. Historian Vernon Parrington called it "the Great Barbecue."<sup>15</sup>

Government not only allowed nearly unfettered private resource development. It also subsidized it. The opening of the American West for settlement by non-Indians during the nineteenth century is often painted as a time of heightened individualism and self-reliance, and there is no question that those human qualities mattered a great deal during that intense time. Nevertheless, settlement was promoted and supported by perhaps the most extensive program of subsidies ever adopted by any government. More than 1 billion acres owned by the United States were given to private citizens and corporations free or for minimal filing fees. Railroads obtained 94 million acres directly and received an additional 37 million acres that had been transferred to states for the benefit of the railroads; these railroad land grants amounted to an area nearly the size of California and Washington combined. In addition to land, the United States dispensed free minerals, timber, range, and water. As with the Newlands Project in Nevada, Congress underwrote most of the massive western dams and reservoirs by passing reclamation acts, beginning in 1902, that extended billions of dollars in subsidies to water development interests.<sup>16</sup>

The states contributed mightily to the subsidies. They transferred to settlers and corporations, at little or no cost, most of the lands and minerals they had received from the federal government at statehood. Until the turn of the twentieth century, states engaged in no regulation whatsoever of hunting and fishing, whether for commercial or subsistence purposes. Western states took a passive, but decisive, stance in the key area of water. They allowed unrestricted diversions from all streams and lakes, without any payment to the government, and decreed that such appropriations