



Who Is Minding the Federal Estate?: Political Management of America's Public Lands

Holly Lippke Fretwell

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Sewage seeping into creeks, crumbling cabins and disintegrating roads, dilapidated visitor centers, catastrophic wildfires: these are some of the sights awaiting visitors to federal lands today. Federal agencies in charge of the public domain call for more support in the form of taxpayer dollars while constantly seeking to add to their holdings; environmental groups call for increased restrictions on land use and resource development; private citizens call for a return to the good old days of crisply tended, crime-free, and unspoiled national parks. All, it seems, overlook the sad fact that the existing federal estate is in terrible shape, badly maintained and managed, and with no immediate hope for improvement. Will more money, more restrictions, more regulations address the problems that plague America's public domain? No: Rather, real improvement requires reform of the managing institutions.

Who Is Minding the Federal Estate? is a book intended for any reader with an interest in improving the condition of our public lands. It begins by examining the origins of the federal estate, which, though originally intended to be a temporary clearinghouse, now comprises a third of the U.S. landmass. The book describes the evolution of laws governing that estate and of the public conception of wilderness—once thought to be abundant and in need of taming, now considered to be inviolable and even sacrosanct. In non-technical prose that draws on economic theory and empirical analysis, it systematically investigates patterns of federal land management—and, more to the point, mismanagement. The book closes by offering a set of alternatives that will improve stewardship of the federal estate both by incorporating more private initiatives and by freeing those lands from the grasp of politicians who come and go in favor of a sustainable, long-term management ethic. These alternatives come unshackled by policies that lead to disasters such as the recent and ongoing epidemic of massive fires sweeping the forests of t

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