

## Preface

*They hang the man and flog the woman  
That steal the goose from off the common,  
But let the greater villain loose  
That steals the common from the goose.*

—Eighteenth-century English folk poem, quoted in Bill Wade,  
“A New Tragedy for the Commons,” *George Wright Forum*

I GREW UP among the vast tracts of postwar suburbia around Chicago. My parents, like their parents, were urban people who grew up in three-flats and apartment blocks in Chicago and Brooklyn. So as a suburban kid with city-bred parents, I did not have much exposure to wild nature or any sort of family tradition in the Great Outdoors. There were no camping trips, no summer camps in the North Woods, no grand tours of the national parks.

How, then, did I come to spend most of my life seeking out, enjoying, longing for, teaching about, reading about, studying, contemplating, and advocating for wild land? A good chunk of the credit must go to the visionary planners and civic leaders who had the bold foresight and civic devotion to establish the Forest Preserve District of Cook County (Illinois) in 1916 (the same year when the National Park Service was created). Growing eventually to 67,000 acres, or roughly 11 percent of the nation's second-most populous county,<sup>1</sup> the Cook County Forest Preserves consist of corridors of wild land along the region's riverways and beyond. Along with the neighboring counties' forest preserve districts, they form a green necklace of forests, wetlands, prairies, and savannas around one of America's most in-

tensely urban metro areas, whose asphalt sprawl stretches across the flatlands of northern Illinois for nearly 7,200 square miles.<sup>2</sup> Today, an appraisal of the real estate on which these preserves sit would likely yield an astronomical sum that would suggest to a free-market advocate that frogs, big bluestem, and bur oaks are not the “best and highest use” of this land. It is something of a small miracle, then, that this wild land, some of which has never seen a plow or saw, remains intact.

As a ten-year-old kid marooned in an ocean of manicured lawns, cul-de-sacs, strip malls, and parking lots, I would seek my escape by jumping on my bike and riding the two miles to Linne Woods, the nearest outpost of the forest preserves along the North Branch of the Chicago River. Despite being little more than 100 acres and surrounded by six-lane arterials and fast-food joints, Linne Woods was, to me at least, a mighty citadel, bursting with mystery, adventure, inspiration, and integrity. In this little refuge, mammoth cottonwoods, which seemed to me as big as Sequoias, lined the bottomlands beside the river and were often full of raucous, roosting crows. In the drier areas, dark old forests of red oaks and sugar maples were carpeted with trillium and mayapples in the spring. Along the western edge, the forest gave way to sunny open prairies and brushy, rabbit-laden meadows that filled the humid summer air with the smell of wild bergamot and Virginia mountain mint, both of which grew profusely. There, the natural world cast its spell on me and led me to become its life-long student. There, I wandered aimlessly for hours and once tried, unsuccessfully of course, to fish with a stick and a string and a safety pin. There, I taught myself to identify trees and once fell through the ice of the river on a 10-degree day and lived to tell about it.

Later, as a teen, when I procured the driver’s license that conferred full citizenship on a child of the suburbs, I began to branch out farther, exploring the larger preserves along the Des Plaines River and beyond. By the time I got to college, there was no stopping me. Over the years, I have had the joy and the privilege of trekking and tramping through public lands—from the dark dripping rain forests of Washington’s Olympic Peninsula to the

enchanting Sea Islands off Georgia's coast and from the magnificently austere Canyonlands of the Southwest to the still, clear lakes and emerald-green forests of the North Woods. Mine has been a life spent exploring and observing our public lands and never ceasing to come away inspired and enriched, whether on a special trip to a far and grand place or, much more frequently, on a hike close to home in southern Wisconsin's rolling oak woods. Public wild land, then, has shaped my entire life, both professional and personal.

Those who would privatize public land often scornfully dismiss as *rent seekers* those who hike, hunt, pick mushrooms, or kayak on public land, contending that they want to push the costs of their personal preferences onto everyone else. This book strongly challenges that notion, perhaps as a way of engaging in what I like to think of as *rent paying*, a way of attending to my debt for this irreplaceable inheritance that I, as an American citizen, have had bestowed on me.

For those who even vaguely monitor natural resource policy in this country, it is becoming quite obvious that for public lands and their supporters, some very dark clouds have gathered overhead. Hardly a month seems to go by without the emergence of new threats to our public lands, whether in the guise of radical state and federal legislation to privatize, declassify, or transfer public land, or the seizure of public land facilities and threats against land managers by armed militants. At the subnational level, state and local public land systems are increasingly beset by disinvestment, outsourced management, and even mothballing and outright sell-off.<sup>3</sup> And now, with the change of administration in Washington and the corresponding move from wholehearted support of public lands to something far less, the pace of change promises to accelerate. To those interested in keeping public land public, our nation has entered an extremely perilous age (as Chapters 1 and 7 address in greater depth).

I offer this book, then, as something of a "gentle polemic," to borrow Charles Goodsell's characterization of his own renowned defense of the federal bureaucracy,<sup>4</sup> but a polemic that is bolstered by all the empirical evidence that I, as a political

scientist, can muster. Until now, my research on the public lands has always stayed scrupulously in the lane of value-free, empirical description and analysis. For this endeavor, however, I feel a compelling need to place my disciplinary expertise at the service of something I care about passionately. As such, this book is prescriptive as well as descriptive and is aimed as much at the policy maker and citizen as at the scholar.

As anyone even remotely familiar with this topic knows, no shortage of ink has been spilled debating the merits or flaws of public land and whether it should be privatized or at least radically reconfigured in some way. Much of this literature, however, argues from the very narrow perspective of economics, ethics, law, or philosophy—and that leaves some large gaps in the public lands literature. For example, few serious comparative evaluations of the performance of our public and private lands are based on overt biological and ecological measures, a realm that seems utterly incomprehensible to the classical economists and is often brushed over in a fairly superficial way even by philosophers and ethicists. This book sets out to offer, at this pivotal moment in the national debate, a fuller, more comprehensive, and multidisciplinary argument for why public land ought to remain firmly in the public's hands. My intent is to make this argument as broad and encompassing as possible, examining empirically and theoretically issues that touch on various aspects of biology, economics, and politics. As such, the individual arguments in their entirety may not even cohere philosophically or paradigmatically. For example, arguments for why privatization is bad economics are almost always instrumentalist in nature, while political arguments about the legitimacy of society's collective preferences tend to stress the inherent value of nature and the morality embedded in that preference. The fact that these two approaches are not necessarily intellectually compatible in no way diminishes their persuasiveness or relevance to the question of privatization. My goal, then, is not to construct a seamless and unified philosophical treatise but, rather, to explore from as many relevant angles as possible why the privatization of our public lands is a dangerous

and misguided policy notion and to consider the issue and make this broader argument by borrowing from the insights of diverse perspectives.

## The Plan of the Book

This book, then, unapologetically makes the case for public lands on biological, economic, and political grounds. In Chapter 1, I introduce the reader to the massive infrastructure of public land that accounts for nearly 1 in 3 American acres. I begin by presenting a very brief history and basic characteristics of this system at the local, state, and federal levels. Chapter 1 also introduces the growing but also cyclical movement to privatize and otherwise reshape public, and especially federal, lands.

Chapter 2 lays out the privatizers' arguments in greater detail and examines the numerous variations of their policy visions and prescriptions. Chapter 3 begins to make the case for public lands, exploring the biological and ecological dimensions of this debate. Comparing how environmental health can be measured on public versus private land, it tests the privatizers' central claim that private land is destined to be better cared for.

Chapter 4 turns to economics—the privatizers' home turf. Going beyond the intellectual limitations of classical free-market economics, this chapter offers a more expansive and nuanced examination of questions of markets and valuation. This chapter builds a case for public land on the basis of measures that derive not only from a traditional economics paradigm (such as return on investment and multiplier effects) but also from the newer and broader framework of *ecosystem services*.

Chapter 5 looks at the wide-ranging political dimensions of the issue, including the fundamental tension between collective values and democracy, on the one hand, and individual preferences and markets, on the other. It also explores aggregate public preferences as measured through survey research. Chapter 6 continues to make the political case for public lands, focusing on the nature and performance of bureaucratic management,

the legitimacy of interest-group participation, and centralized versus decentralized decision making, as well as how these factors correspond to community input. Chapter 7 concludes by contemplating the future of our public lands in the face of the many existing challenges and promises, both immediate and long term.