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## This Land is Your Land, by Bernard Shanks

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## THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

By Bernard Shanks.

San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 1984

Pp. x + 310. \$19.95.

Anyone who thinks the problems of our public lands are simple would do well to read this book, along with a briefer one, *Natural Resources: Bureaucratic Myths and Environmental Management* by Richard Stroup and John Baden, reviewed in 24 *Natural Resources Journal* 256.

Vastly different in approach, both books agree that the public lands should be far better managed than they are. Nor does either speak glowingly of the bureaucratic agencies in charge of these lands. I see no reason to question the good faith represented by these authors in supporting a desire to see a public lands management policy that will protect the interests of future generations.

It is on the issue of means rather than ends that the split in opinion is evident. Stroup and Baden, in viewing the land now comprising the United States of America as originally *de facto* a commons, see it as an example of the tragedy resulting when individual interests expand their share at the expense of others. The remedy they propose is to sell public lands to private owners whose self-interest presumably would ensure a sum total of prudent management. "Since the time of the ancients it has been widely understood that government, with its monopoly on sanctified coercion, has the potential for being the most efficient engine ever designed for the generation of plunder."<sup>1</sup>

The contrasting views of Bernard Shanks are expressed in his title—*This Land is Your Land*. The evil lies not in public ownership, he writes, but in the failure of the owners to see that their interests are truly protected. Whether Americans are ignorant of, indifferent to, or content to delegate to the inevitable government bureaucratic machinery, their responsibility of ownership of so-called "public lands," unless there is adequate protection against the terrific pressure of special interests, disaster is inevitable. In urging the public to assert its responsibility, Shanks presents some startling examples of executive disposal of public resources. Included is the 1982 sale of an estimated 1.5 billion tons of coal at three cents or less per ton. (p. 124) Also, "The company took more than 17 billion pounds of copper from the mines and open pits around Butte, but it returned not one cent of royalty to the American people for the use of their land." (p. 126)

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1. RICHARD STROUP & JOHN BADEN, *NATURAL RESOURCES: BUREAUCRATIC MYTHS AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT*, ch. 1 at 2 (1983).

Stroup and Baden, on the other hand, while concerned with the mismanagement of natural resources, would have strengthened their case for private ownership by admitting that these abuses took place under a form of that system. It is time to reconsider the extraordinary powers vested in the administration of the Department of the Interior, which exempt it for all practical purposes from the traditional system of checks and balances in disposing of the rights to public land. We need no further examples than the Ballinger-Pinchot controversy, the Teapot Dome episode, and the events noted in the preceding paragraph. These two authors are correct in their call for institutional change and should be read with care by conservationists to keep them honest in their judgment of classical economics. But where so obvious a reform is not suggested, *caveat lector*.

Having since 1931 been able to observe the training and work of professional foresters and more recently of other resource managers, I find it hard to support any blanket indictment of these professionals who must carry out the will of society. Their enthusiasm for their chosen work as I have seen it is genuine; the pressures they encounter are tremendous. I happened to be in Washington when the ukase was issued making the Forest Service responsible for recreation; the effect on individuals already charged to provide timber, grazing, water, wildlife, and soil protection was not pleasant to observe.

The basic truth is, as pointed out to me years ago by an elder of many talents and wide experience, that each engineer, farmer, naturalist, sportsman, speculator, artist, looks upon the same land in terms of personal interest, background, and knowledge. A further point is that everybody's business is very likely to be nobody's business. To which we must add Lincoln's reminder that democracy itself is still on trial, and, if we have the stomach for it, Churchill's reported dictum that it is the worst of systems, excepting all others.

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