



Winter 1984

**Natural Resources: Bureaucratic Myths and Environmental Management, R. Stroup and J. Baden**

Paul B. Sears

**Recommended Citation**

Paul B. Sears, *Natural Resources: Bureaucratic Myths and Environmental Management, R. Stroup and J. Baden*, 24 NAT. RES. J. 255 (1984).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol24/iss1/15>

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### NATURAL RESOURCES: BUREAUCRATIC MYTHS AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

R. STROUP AND J. BADEN

New York: Ballinger Publishing Company for Pacific Institute for Public Policy Research. 1983. Pp. 168. \$25.00

The names of two fields of inquiry, Economics and Ecology, derive from the same Greek root. This common origin implies for both a concern with the household of mankind known as Planet Earth. Roughly speaking, Ecology, conceived and nurtured by students of life and landscape, is an endeavor to understand the nature of that household: Economics is an endeavor to analyze Man's stewardship of it. For one who has for many years urged the necessity for communication and mutual understanding among and between the workers in both fields, to review *Natural Resources* is a substantial challenge.

This book is an indictment of bureaucratic government control in the handling of natural resources. It also insists stoutly that the best (and only?) means of combining responsibility with authority is the private ownership of resources. We are assured that through the market system this can develop the most efficient use of resources. As to the delicate question of achieving such private ownership, there are repeated mentions of "institutional change." More specific is the suggestion that national forests be sold to private owners and large "chunks" of public land to conservation groups.

So far as I can tell, any quest for knowledge is an act of faith. If true this would apply to economics, whether classical or any other school of that discipline. In this instance it appears to be the assumption that freedom of self-interest is the surest route to the general good. Congenial as I find this idea, it is hard doctrine for anyone familiar with the rape of the magnificent Lake States forest, the course westward from the Atlantic seaboard of erosion on private farms, the failure to sustain production of valuable eastern hardwoods on woodlots, the deterioration of western rangelands, the over-exploitation of groundwater, and worsening quality of air and water.

These are matters of dispassionate scientific observation, not mere "horror stories." Such colored expressions, giving an impression of special pleading, somewhat mar the usefulness of an excellent book. The same is true of certain declarative statements, however supported by the ample references necessary to so brief a volume. On no account must the authors be blamed for indifference to past abuses or lack of desire to remedy them. But their plea for private ownership and responsibility would have been strengthened by more perspective.

Essential to perspective is an understanding of political events in the past, attributable to government rather than its bureaucrats. In contrast to France where continuing family ownership of farmland has been possible, our early legislation and later judicial action has made this difficult if not impossible. Resulting from fear of a landed class, explainable at the time but now absurd in the face of huge corporate industrial developments, these restrictions have encouraged land owners to get while the getting is good, with little incentive to preserve and improve for the future. Many a truth is spoken in jest; "Don't tell me how to farm, I've worn out three farms" is not a bad example.

Again, and with profoundly serious consequences for the West, there has been the failure of Congress to heed the counsel of Major J. W. Powell in his 1878 report on the arid lands of the West. Instead of the traditional mile-square units of more humid areas, Powell recommended that land holdings be of ample size and shaped with reference to their nature, notably the availability of water. Instead, as an ownership map of New Mexico shows, we have an impossible checkerboard of rectangular sections, each too small for efficient management, variously owned by nation, state, and individual. For a discussion of this problem the reader should consult Chapter 8, "The Demise of the Sagebrush Rebellion," using his best judgment as he does so.

Meanwhile an observation made in a northern plains state some years ago may be helpful. Here a number of farmers owning at least a square mile each were in distress. At the same time another group of owners of similar rectangles were prospering. They had pooled their holdings and given a manager authority to throw them all together, planning use according to available water and other conditions. This suggests that even the merits of private ownership are subject to the social sanctions known to anthropologists as culture patterns.

And finally a word may be said as to the vigorous condemnation of bureaucrats, whose function after all is to carry out the mandates of legislation. Anyone familiar with the Forest Service through many years is likely to be more impressed by the patience and persistence of its personnel under continuous pressure than by any conflicts of its interests.

PAUL B. SEARS  
Taos, New Mexico