

The Empire Strikes Back

Wise Use movement says enough is enough

By Glenn Oakley

In the last desperate days of the wild and free Western Indians, many among the tribes turned to the messianic cult of the Ghost Dance — a religious and social movement that promised the people invulnerability to the white man's bullets and a return of the buffalo and the old ways. These days, ranchers, loggers and miners who see their way of life slipping away have their own version of the Ghost Dance; it's called the Wise Use movement.

Wise Use is a coalition of logging, mining, ranching and motorized recreation organizations seeking local control over federal lands and the weakening or elimination of environmental regulations, which are perceived as being the primary cause of their industry's decline. Frequently funded by resource extraction corporations, the Wise Use groups employ the tactics of their sworn adversaries, the environmentalists: grassroots organizing, local political action, citizen lobbying and public rallies.

In Boise, a Jan. 18 "Save Western Ways" rally drew more than 1,000 people, culminating in a five-block march in the city center. The rally, says one of the organizers, Ron Harrington of Emmett, was staged to "get the message to the general public that there is a movement afoot to change the West."

Grazing reform, the Endangered Species Act and changes in mining laws threaten the livelihoods of many people in the West, says Harrington, a director on the Northwest Timber Workers Resource Council. "Federal policies are taking rights away from us. The impact on people should be taken into consideration," he says.

One method the Wise Use movement uses to catch federal attention is to enact county ordinances that assert local control over federal public lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management. The ordinances are patterned almost word-for-word after a law passed in Catron County, New Mexico, which asserts that federal land managers must not enact regulations that

would disrupt the traditional "custom and culture" of the county. Under the ordinances, reductions in timber harvests or grazing allotments would require county approval. It also prohibits the designation of federal wilderness areas within the county. In the state of Idaho, Lemhi, Owyhee, Boundary and Washington counties have passed such ordinances. Boise, Oneida and Custer Counties passed resolutions supporting the concept of the ordinance. And Teton and Cassia counties are deliberating formal adoption of the ordinance.

Bonnors Ferry resident Ina Pluid petitioned the Boundary County commissioners to pass the Catron County-type ordinance

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after attending an American Agriwomen conference in Boise.

Pluid says, "Our big concern was not to mandate regulations, because we know we can't force the Forest Service to not enforce the Endangered Species Act or the NEPA [National Environmental Policy] Act. But we want to be in on the ground floor planning." Pluid says under the current situation, once the Forest Service establishes its land management proposals, "the public comment is null and void."

Boundary County is a logging and farming

region that has seen timber harvest reductions in recent years. Pluid says, "People just feel like they're being locked out and shut out. There are a lot of people who aren't working here who were working two years ago. Last year this timber district had eight proposed timber sales come up. At one time six of them were tied in appeals [by local environmental organizations]."

"My family is a fourth generation logging family," says Pluid. "We know if we cut every stick there won't be any work left for us or our kids. Trees are either growing or dying. We don't understand why we can't have more access to these trees. Why let the forest die or burn by nature?"

But conservationists argue the Wise Use movement is blaming environmental regulations for problems the timber industry has created by overcutting the forests. "They're saying they want their rules to supercede federal planning and management mandates," responds Glenn Stewart, director of the Idaho Conservation League. "They want to say, 'In our county, by God, we're going to cut as much as we want because it's our custom and culture to keep our mills open.' We can't allow them to go out there and take our public lands and cut them at unsustainable levels."

Boundary County is the only place in America where the custom and culture ordinance has been challenged in court. Local conservation groups filed suit against the ordinance after Congressman Larry LaRocco was informed at a Bonnors Ferry wilderness hearing that designated wilderness had been outlawed in the county. Coeur d'Alene attorney Scott Reed won the case, proving the ordinance was unconstitutional. But Reed says that since winning the case on Jan. 27, Boundary County has passed another ordinance. This one, he says, is based on an 1866 law designating established roadways as county property. Through the latest ordinance the county has laid claim to all Forest Service roads as part of the Boundary County highway system, says Reed.



Events like the Save Western Ways rally in January are held to increase public awareness of Wise Use issues.

Reed says Boundary County residents are angry over road closures the Forest Service has instituted to protect endangered caribou and grizzly bear. "If you're in a place like Boundary County where you've got endangered caribou, grizzly, brown trout, sturgeon, Uncle Sam looks like an enemy," says Reed.

While the Wise Use movement maintains a strong anti-federalist theme, it specifically targets environmentalists as the leading villain in the demise of traditional America.

Clark Collins, director of the Pocatello-based Blue Ribbon Coalition, a national Wise Use group for off-road vehicle owners and manufacturers, says in the group's *Blue Ribbon Magazine*, "As 'preservationists' seek to influence policy more and more, acting to 'socialize' and impose their views upon the majority of the rest of us 'by force of law,' we can only conclude that they are the new political arm of communism.

"Investigations into their leadership and eventual aims seem to bear out that their primary intent is not necessarily on 'preserving nature,' but rather more on exercising political power over our entire lives."

Clark wrote in a recent column, "many of these so-called environmentalists have deteriorated into out and out hate groups." He went on to note that, "More folks are finally realizing that what is actually being advocated by environmental extremists is the elimination of the human race."

Environmental extremists simply see some industry they want to destroy and start

looking for an endangered species with which they can put a stop to it and put working men and women out of work, explains Clark.

To what extent the rank and file members of Wise Use groups agree with Clark and other movement leaders is debatable. Asked whether she believed environmentalists were actually seeking socialism, Phuid responded, "That's a pretty radical statement." But she believes environmentalists are determined to end logging. "If it's not endangered species, they'll come up with something else," she says.

Dan Barry, director of the Clearinghouse for Environmental Advocacy and Research in Washington, D.C., Barry says much of the funding for the Wise Use organizations comes from corporations "interested in relaxing regulations." But, says Barry, "It would be a mistake to characterize it as a false front movement on behalf of industries. I also think there are landowners out there who think government has gotten too obtrusive. I think the environmental community needs to understand that and address that."

Many environmentalists fear the Wise Use movement is making compromise and cooperation more difficult. "I think they're being extremely effective at polarizing communities," says Wilderness Society spokeswoman Kathy Kilmer. "I am not discounting that Western rural communities have fears about the future. The reality is the extractive industries in many areas are in decline," she says.

Similarly, Idaho Conservation League lobbyist Melinda Harm says, the Wise Use movement is "not addressing the real issues. We're dealing with tough economic issues where big agribusiness is outcompeting the little guys. I would say there's an abuse of [plant and wildlife] species. We didn't invent extinction.

"The wise use movement attempts to make the atmosphere around these issues so volatile, it's impossible to have meaningful dialogue. We're all people. We all have a stake in having a bright and happy future."

"There is hope," says Harrington. "If people don't lose their cool, we can always sit down and compromise. We're not out to ruin the land. We make a living off the land ... why would we want to ruin it?"

Meanwhile, the Wise Use movement seems to be spreading. "Two to three years ago it was considered to be Sagebrush Rebellion revisited," says Barry, referring to the 1980s effort to privatize the public land. "It certainly has spread beyond the West," he says, pointing to organizations in New England, the deep South and even Canada and Australia.

Reed says, "I think eventually it will all collapse, just as the Sagebrush Rebellion did. Ultimately the public will decide they want the lands left public."

But Barry isn't so sure. "I think there's an indication the Wise Use movement is not going to fade away like the Sagebrush Rebellion. I wouldn't say it's a last gasp. It will be more of a sustained political debate." □