

Opinion: 2 lesser-known reasons to celebrate public lands

By Martin Nie, High Country News

America has spent the last year celebrating the centennial of the National Park Service. Given that the agency protects 80 million acres – 3.5 percent of the United States – this is a birthday well worth celebrating.

But two other important birthdays passed almost unnoticed: October marked the 40th anniversary of both the Federal Land Policy Management Act, or FLPMA (pronounced “flipma”), which covers the Bureau of Land Management’s holdings, and the National Forest Management Act (pronounced “nifma”), which covers our national forests. The combined acreage overseen by the two laws amounts to almost 20 percent of the U.S.

Of course, the very notion of publicly managed lands, which are mostly concentrated in the West, has its adversaries. Most spectacularly, the Bundy Clan occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon after decades of flouting federal grazing laws. Meanwhile, a more insidious threat to public ownership comes from those politicians and interest groups seeking the transfer of federal lands to the states or into private ownership.

Why have these two almost unknown laws inspired such resistance? Because each in its own way transformed the federal lands into law-abiding areas that could be managed for our collective good.

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