

Recreation redefining value of Western public lands

By Kate Schimel and Brooke Warren, High Country News

Once, the West's public lands were valued primarily for the timber, minerals and fossil fuels they held, which were extracted and then sold around the world.

In the 1970s, more than two dozen Western counties relied on timber for at least a fifth of their revenue, while energy companies expanded onto public lands for coal and natural gas. Small communities swelled with loggers and miners and the businesses that supported them, providing an economy that helped preserve the West's rural feel.

Today, though, natural resource economies are waning, and many of those towns are struggling. Public lands are increasingly used for fun and leisure, and the West has joined the Northeast as the two most urbanized regions in the country, according to U.S. Census data analyzed by Headwaters Economics.

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