

# 'Pullback' plan to check the land grabbers

U.S. FEDERAL LANDS

IN 1957, Marion Clawson and R. Burnell Held wrote about the U.S. public domain in *The Federal Lands: Their Use and Management*. Since then there have been changes, and Mr. Clawson – perhaps the outstanding expert on public lands – has taken a new look at the situation in *The Federal Lands Revisited* (Resources for the Future, 1983). Mr. Clawson has been closely connected with federal lands, both in and out of government, for nearly half a century.

In the 1957 book it was noted that there were five phases or eras in the history of federal lands: acquisition, disposal, reservation, custodial management and intensive management. The authors presumed that this last phase was here to stay.

But since then another phase has ensued which Mr. Clawson designates as "a period of consultation and confrontation". The changes since 1957 include the following:

- Greatly increased use of the public lands and revenue therefrom;
- Increasing pressure from conservation groups to preserve wilderness areas; and
- The "Sagebrush Rebellion" – a movement to privatize public lands.

The public domain consists of about 770m acres, almost one-third of the total area of the U.S. Formerly it was nearly 40%, but a large chunk in Alaska was turned over to it when it achieved statehood. So it's a very large area that is under consideration. Total value is estimated at about \$500 billion.

Among uses of federal lands are forestry, grazing, mining and recreation. A big increase has been in the leasing of off-shore tracts for oil production. Federal revenues from the public lands were near \$22 billion in 1982 and could have been much more if the full value were taken.

THE AGITATION for turning over public lands to private interests reached its height when the controversial James Watt was President Reagan's Secretary of the Interior. The opportunity to force his resignation came when his penchant for uttering gaffes created a national uproar. (Curiously, Mr. Clawson does not mention him in his 1983 book).

Mr. Clawson endeavours to be impartial in presenting the pro and con arguments on the privatization of public lands.



● MARION CLAWSON: outstanding expert

## Bob Clancy reports from New York

He notes that one of the pro arguments is that federal management of the public lands is bureaucratic and inefficient. This is undoubtedly true – but it is not solely for the sake of efficiency that private interests want to take over the land.

A blunter critique is made in another book, *This Land is Your Land* by Bernard Shanks (published by the Sierra Club). He notes that public lands are already made available to big private interests, free or at very low prices, and estimates that this give-away has amounted to a trillion dollars in the Reagan administration alone.

*These interests would like to grab the whole public domain.*

While not rejecting privatization out of hand (some could be done selectively), Mr. Clawson believes that public lands still have a place in American life along with private lands and that it is in our long-range interest to guard them and manage them well.

He offers guidelines for future management, including a carefully worked-out system of leasing, with the area and length of lease depending on the land use.

A "pullback" system is proposed where when a lease is offered, part of the area will be open to bidding by another party for a limited time. Mr. Clawson believes this would discourage collusion, encourage competition and prevent public lands from falling into too few hands.

Recreational use of national parks has increased greatly – from about 5m visits in 1920 to about 250m visits annually today.

Some years ago Marion Clawson offered a proposal for recreational public lands which attracted attention but which he does not mention in his book. He seems to have had misgivings about it, but it's worth mentioning.

He referred to "apparent availability" vs. "effective availability" of national parks. Noting that these parks are mostly in sparsely inhabited areas, relatively inaccessible to densely populated areas, he proposed a system of varying charges for the use of the parks depending on their distance from the user. An interesting idea, approximating the conception of rental value and its recouping by government.

Mr. Clawson believes that public lands deserve greatly improved management, with attention to their best use, such that "the values or benefits should be the full value to society of the output." He also asks for continuing research, better information and more public participation in policy-making.

The public domain of the U.S. is an important part of the over-all land situation and deserves continued attention. A few more Marion Clawsons and fewer James Watts might bring us closer to a good public land policy.