

Opinion: Time to stand up for public lands

By Todd Tanner, High Country News

As Google Earth flies, it's five miles and change from the Echo Lake Café in the Flathead Valley, one of Montana's great little restaurants, up to a parking area at a trailhead that leads to Jewel Basin. Down here in the valley, we're at 3,000 feet. Up where the gravel road dead-ends, you're looking at 5,700 feet. If you make it all the way to the top of 7,500-foot-high Mount Aeneas, you'll be rubbing elbows with some top-of-the-world views, not to mention mule deer and mountain goats.

We're talking about almost a mile of elevation change, yet the amazing thing is that once you leave the valley floor, all that land stretching on seemingly forever belongs to you and me and all of our fellow Americans. It doesn't matter whether you live here in Montana, or in Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico or New Jersey. All that acreage, which is administered on our behalf by the U.S. Forest Service, is ours. We can roam where we choose, we can hike, we can fish the lakes and pick fresh huckleberries for lunch and pitch our tents under all that Big Sky. We're free to wander to our heart's content on public land, and for a lot of Americans, that's an incredible thing.

I'd go so far as to say that here in Montana and across the West, our public lands, which make up 50 percent or more of our states, equate to freedom. Let's make that freedom and prosperity, because almost everything of substance, from our Western heritage to our economy to our recreation, flows from the bounty of our public lands.

That is why it's so disappointing that 51 U.S. senators, every single one of them entrusted with our nation's well-being,

recently cast a vote that could help destroy the West – one that could turn over America's public lands to multinational corporations, lock out hunters and hikers, and shift control of our timber, our grazing rights, and our minerals, along with the very lifeblood of the West – our water – to profiteers and foreign interests.

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