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Sometimes, It Takes a Table

Imagine the public lands as a table around which Americans gather. Sharing space, those assembled converse, propose, debate, and aspire. Unanimity comes rarely to these spaces, although that hardly diminishes their power to inspire. But treated as a place in common—a table—these public lands encourage diverse voices to be heard so that we might decide the land's fate as part of an ongoing negotiation between people and nature.

I draw my table analogy from Hannah Arendt. Few intellectuals in the twentieth century stand out as original as Arendt, a German Jewish political philosopher who fled the Nazis in 1933 and arrived in the United States in 1941. Her work on totalitarianism, the banality of evil, and revolution grew out of what she witnessed during the mid-twentieth century's worst worshipping of ideology and has enjoyed a renewed readership since the 2016 American election. Her theories, however, also offer something to environmental historians, although scarcely a trace of her is found in our work.[1]

One of Arendt's projects, *The Human Condition* (1958), centered on how people might act politically.[2] In it, Arendt praised *vita activa* (an active life) as opposed to the *vita contemplativa* (a contemplative life) that ancient philosophers favored. The realm of action arises, according to Arendt, because people must come together, establish a public, and make political decisions. Arendt's ideas here help environmental historians who are concerned with how diverse groups assemble and decide how to act. She deploys a powerful metaphor of a table to explain the world where people interact.[3] "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it

Adam M. Sowards, "Sometimes, It Takes a Table," *Environmental History* 23 (2018): 143–151

doi: 10.1093/envhis/emx122
Advance Access Publication Date: 13 November 2017

in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, *relates and separates* men at the same time," she wrote. "The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other."[4] Around that metaphorical table, the public sits and attends to mutual concerns.

The American public lands constitute such an Arendtian table. Their condition reveals the vibrancy of our democracy and the resilience of our ecological health. Especially in the West, where they comprise the majority of several states, public lands serve as a bedrock for environmental citizenship for the region. There is no escaping the ways the ecological and political functions of these lands have been and remain bound up with the exercise of citizenship. Gatherings around the public lands table have culminated in disorder, shouting matches, and even violence. In the last several decades, conversations about our national forests, parks, rangelands, and refuges have become more contentious, in part because they included constituencies broader than a managerial elite and self-interested commodity users that existed in a golden age those very groups remember and often pine for. Think only of the battle in the redwoods in the 1980s, the antagonism around wolf reintroduction in the northern Rockies since the 1990s, or the challenges to expanding oil and gas drilling happening now in the intermountain West despite the global threat of climate change. Democracy promises no equanimity, yet neither does it require intransigent hostilities. Environmentalists and ranchers, Natives and newcomers, farmers and recreationists, historians and scientists have worked together in the past and can again.

Sitting at the table brings myriad experiences and values to bear on not only public lands but also on the health of the democratic system. Writer Terry Tempest Williams explained, "The integrity of our public lands depends on the integrity of our public process within the open space of democracy."[5] This double-barreled integrity—of land and democracy—points toward protecting ecological and political processes and becomes a critical criterion for any successful conservation. When framed this way, our collective grappling with public lands becomes a useful barometer for the health of our democracy, as well as our environment.

Public lands in the United States figure prominently in the nation's environmental history and span the country. They support long-distance hiking on the Appalachian Trail and mountain biking in the Coconino National Forest outside Sedona, Arizona; they provide space for tourism in crowded Yosemite National Park or backcountry rafting through the largely unpeopled Salmon River in central Idaho; they support timber production in Minnesota's Chippewa National Forest and livestock grazing on the Great Basin's Bureau of Land Management ranges. Although the public land system is a heritage

for all the nation's people, not everyone has been allowed at the table; the land's history has been far from democratic. It began with Indigenous dispossession. As historian Louis Warren succinctly explained it, "Only through the violent removal of Indian means to reproduce community and culture, only through destruction of their bodies, could the US turn Native American earth into American land."[6] Building on that legacy of violence, American law that predated even the Constitution pressed that land, the public domain, into national purpose for what architects of the policy assumed and asserted were shared values. Turned into private property overwhelmingly for white men, the public domain became the raw material to build farms that, according to the founders' vision, would promote and protect the republic's virtue and improve the nation.

Despite some successes with the Homestead Act (1862) and other ways of creating property out of the land, some Americans reassessed the public domain by the nineteenth century's end. Among other things, they worried about corporations fraudulently using land laws, environmental harms stemming from cut-and-run logging practices, and hunting animals to extinction. So reformers shifted from an exclusively private property vision, and soon national parks, national forests, and wildlife refuges stood outside the private ownership framework that had been so central to American national development. The public land system was built with federal agencies, federal laws, and federal managers scattered across the landscape, designed ostensibly to promote the public interest.

However, what constituted that interest remained, and remains, debatable, a perfect place for focus around an Arendtian table, a place where environmental historians can take a seat to offer essential and critical perspectives. For decades, the table was an exclusive one, open to a small group with mostly similar views. This group was led at first by federal managers, those scientists and engineers who pursued a mission of control and efficiency in natural resource management.[7] The system presumed these experts could dispassionately study resource problems and devise strategies to achieve desired goals: to produce timber, to control fires, to protect scenery, to manage wildlife (and varmints), and so on. Before long, commodity groups joined the experts and came to exercise such a dominant influence that they often guided official policies and practices, best exemplified by instances where ranchers paid the salaries of Bureau of Land Management officials, the regulated paying the salaries of the regulators.[8] Such a skewed system meant not everyone secured places at the table.

Two trends in the mid- to late twentieth century reconfigured that version of public land management. One was technical and scientific; the other political and legal. Scientists learned to observe and understand ecological interdependencies far better, forcing them to reassess

practices like clear-cutting and fire suppression on national forests and predator control on western rangelands. The scientific evidence of harm accumulated and helped to introduce other values into management. The second trend included new laws to protect wilderness and endangered species, both of which centered squarely on public lands as nearly the only place where sufficient habitat remained to support the sort of solitude and biodiversity requirements inherent in laws like the Wilderness Act (1964) and the Endangered Species Act (1973). But the legislative revolution of the 1960s and 1970s not only allowed public lands to promote something other than commodity production; it also created new processes that allowed a broader public to participate in public land management and planning decisions.[9] Public hearings, such as those prescribed in the National Environmental Policy Act (1970), gave legitimate voice to the *public* part of public lands for the first time in substantive ways. These changes came only through persistent activism by those we would call environmentalists, a group maligned by commodity interests and their political partners who lost preeminent power over managing the public lands.

What these changes meant is starkest perhaps when examining western rangelands. For example, grazing advisory boards had dominated public domain grazing management since the Taylor Grazing Act (1934). They were composed of local ranchers who assigned stocking levels for local grazing allotments and enjoyed near autonomy. However, by the time of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (1976), those advisory boards had become multiple-use advisory councils and later resource advisory councils, shifts in labels that reflected two things. One, interested parties besides ranchers, including wilderness and wildlife advocates, now took a seat at the table. Two, the law recognized that "multiple use" on western rangelands included values beyond the ability to fatten livestock. More and different people at the table meant more and different uses on the land were deemed appropriate. Consequently, public lands needed to be managed for uses besides resource extraction.[10]

And therein laid seeds of deep conflict that eventually germinated in a groundswell of opposition to national conservation measures. Many celebrated this new vision of conservation and multiple use that included backpacking, wild horses, and ecological restoration besides commodity production, but others felt left behind and powerless with these policy prescriptions and different values ascending.[11] On the public lands, these clashes became regular, even endemic. But this is the very nature of the public—its plurality. As Arendt explained, a table did not gather people together and meld them into one, but instead it preserved differences and those present gained power because of witnesses and visibility: "For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present

have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position."[12] What creates this public realm that Arendt so valued is not some essence of the citizenry—a common race, religion, language, political party, or economic interest—but instead a shared attention. This common place for thinking and debate, then, assures that those gathered can focus and grapple with the same thing even though they will not see it in identical ways. But without the table, those gathered would be neither separated nor related; no public sphere could exist in which to act politically.[13] The public lands, then, reflect and demand messy, disagreeing democracy, while the environmental revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, not to mention various civil rights movements, guaranteed more voices would contribute. Whether they spoke politely turn by turn or shouted over one another is part of the ongoing test.

Tables other than the type Arendt described are possible. For instance, many tables today are surrounded by inattentive people, gazing at their phones and an endless stream of media. Such a gathering does not meet the Arendtian imperative, for the table only separates; it does not relate. Attention does not center on that which is held in common; social media algorithms are geared for the individual, not the larger community. This problem hints at our inattention to growing problems on public lands (indeed, on the planet). While partisans fight in courts or across news feeds or get lost amid follies or foibles in Washington, D.C., or Hollywood, species die out, habitats shrink, climate changes. The attention to mere conflict or mindlessness misses attention to the common—and in this case, the commons.

As another example, tables are increasingly what we might call tribalist in nature, where everyone at the table shares interests and politics.[14] At such venues, like-minded people identify opponents and diagnose problems with near unanimity in a reinforcing cycle, refusing to acknowledge that another side exists. Soon it becomes inconceivable to think otherwise. Alternatively, it becomes easy to see those who think outside the tribalist line as holding illegitimate views. Such tables hold none of the diversity, the plurality inherent in the human condition Arendt so aptly described and valued. At a tribalist table, only one party is invited or welcomed. Democracy sits elsewhere.

Although today we seem deep in the mire, none of this blind distraction or loyalty is inherent in public lands or politics. Recent examples are instructive. Southeast Oregon's Steens Mountain became a site of conflict in the 1990s as the Clinton administration sought stronger conservation measures to restore riparian habitat for redband trout, an alarming prospect to local ranchers who feared

their operations' value dropping as a result. Sitting down, repeatedly, with others—outfitters, environmentalists, tribal and community members—eventually brought forth a compromise that added some wilderness, retired some grazing allotments, and provided some long-term grazing permits elsewhere. To historian Nancy Langston, who told this multilayered story, it exemplified what compromises and solutions can happen when politics, law, and other threats bring people together with shared attention.[15]

Another example depicts a more frustrating, even tragic, outcome. In the Bitterroot Mountains, on the national forests that bridge the Montana and Idaho borderland, environmentalists hoped to reintroduce grizzly bears, an agenda Idaho's timber industry opposed. Soon, as writer Michael J. Dax tells it, a timber-affiliated group, Resource Organization on Timber Supply (ROOTS), modified its opposition. Instead of opposing grizzly reintroduction, ROOTS worked with Defenders of Wildlife and other environmental organizations in a coalition to devise a plan that supported the predators in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area as an experimental population. The plan included an innovative citizen management component inserted to give local populations a greater voice than most species recovery programs permitted. By the mid-1990s, just as wolf reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park boiled in controversy, an unusual coalition from virtually the same region with virtually the same politics managed to devise an encouraging plan through a willingness to forgo winner-take-all approaches. The result was an environmental impact statement released in 2000 supporting reintroduction. Yet this high point crumbled amid increasingly ideological objections to the plan from constituencies on both sides, although often outside the process, that is, not those sitting down at the table. Relying on caricatures and symbols rather than coalition building and compromise, political support polarized, and grizzly reintroduction died. Its rise and fall demonstrates the strength of sitting at shared tables and the vulnerabilities of leaving them behind.[16]

Any successful approach to public lands management requires that we consider people and place over time, a perspective historically lacking. Instead, these lands have been treated, by the public, by managers, by Congress, as almost endlessly malleable, regardless of the nature or culture that occupied specific locales. Environmental historians, in contrast, provide insights about opportunities and limits, about those excluded and those included, about best laid plans and unintended consequences. Our field often reads as a cautionary tale, and so environmental historians ought to involve ourselves in these discussions in public and not just in journals and university press monographs.

As well as anyone, Aldo Leopold thought deeply about the ways land and people intersected across time when he sought to develop a

land ethic appropriate to a place's history. However, in her searching memoir, *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*, environmental scientist and writer Lauret Savoy questioned Leopold. When reading his *A Sand County Almanac* as a teenager, Savoy admired Leopold's push to enlarge boundaries of "community" beyond simply humans but wondered why the slaves he referenced came from faraway in ancient Greece. Savoy, who claims inheritance from Africa, Europe, and North America, "feared that his 'we' and 'us' excluded me and other Americans with ancestral roots in Africa, Asia, or Native America."[17]

Such discomfort sits with many stories in American environmental history, not least on the public lands where what constitutes "public" has long been contested. But there is capacity for transcendence. Later, when Savoy visited the site of Leopold's "sand county" restoration experiments, she reflected on the lessons nature furnished for human communities, "For if the health of the land is its capacity for self-renewal, then the health of the human family could, in part, be an intergenerational capacity for locating ourselves within many inheritances: as citizens of the land, of nations even within a nation, and of Earth. Democracy lies within ever widening communities."[18] Here we again see the need to link democratic and environmental health, and in doing so, Savoy brings Leopold's vision forward, hopefully, into the diverse twenty-first century.

But this is also an uncertain time for democracy and public lands. Early in 2016, a group of disaffected armed men (mostly) occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Oregon, not far from Steens Mountain. For more than a month, they held the refuge hostage, arguing the federal government was an illegitimate presence there and called for the public land to be "returned" to the people (to be sure, white ranchers and not the Paiute) and put back into ranching. The spectacle riveted national attention, drawing supporters and detractors. Hal Herring, a splendid writer who observed Malheur up close, found a scene of grave concern: "I went to the Malheur looking for kindred spirits. I found the mad, the fervent, the passionately misguided. . . . Love of country becomes hatred of those we believe don't share our devotion, or don't share it the same way."[19] Herring captured the essential problem that became especially extreme at Malheur but is common throughout the public lands: disagreement becomes hatred.

Or consider the still unfolding story of Bears Ears National Monument as a reflection of today's uncertainty over public lands and democratic participation. After years of work spearheaded by Native communities in the Four Corners, President Barack Obama declared the monument in southeastern Utah. The achievement was a remarkable reversal: a public land system rooted in Native dispossession finally adding landscapes because of the ideas from and

comanagement with those same Indigenous groups. And yet, the new Trump administration remains fixated on weakening this conservation legacy, ignoring public pleas and Native sovereignty (all the while touting the opposite) and calling for a 90 percent reduction.[20]

Walking away from the Arendtian table—an easy choice the Trump administration appears to encourage—weakens trust and eviscerates the public. Instead, we should take our cue from gatherings like one described by Terry Tempest Williams in her book, *This Hour of Land*. Williams tells of sitting around a table with a dozen representatives from Southwest communities and organizations, gathered to discuss protecting land in southern Utah. Maps were drawn separately, and when shared, "the boundaries we had drawn separately were closer together than anyone knew once we gathered around *one common table of concern*."[21] Sometimes, as Arendt advocated and anticipated, it just takes a table.

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Notes

I thank Lisa Brady, Leisl Carr Childers, Jeff Sanders, Kelley Sowards, and the anonymous reviewer for help with clarifying ideas and writing.

1. My search of *Environmental History*'s index returned Arendt four times in the journal's history, although none of those could be considered a substantial reference.
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
3. Marguerite S. Shaffer, "Why Public Culture?" in *Public Culture: Diversity, Democracy, and Community in the United States*, ed. Marguerite S. Shaffer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), x, first drew me to Arendt's metaphor.
4. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52 (emphasis added).
5. Terry Tempest Williams, *The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America's National Parks* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2016), 267.
6. Louis Warren, "Owning Nature: Toward an Environmental History of Private Property," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 406.
7. The best representative case studies for how this management developed and its consequences remain Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), and Langston, *Where Land and Water Meet: A Western Landscape Transformed* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).

8. Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 205.
9. See Samuel P. Hays, in collaboration with Barbara D. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 527–43.
10. See James R. Skillen, *The Nation's Largest Landlord: The Bureau of Land Management in the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), and Leisl Carr Childers, *The Size of the Risk: Histories of Multiple Use in the Great Basin* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).
11. Leisl Carr Childers, "The Angry West: Understanding the Sagebrush Rebellion in Rural Nevada," in *Bridging the Distance: Common Issues of the Rural West*, ed. David B. Danbom (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015), 213–38.
12. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.
13. Ibid., 52–58 passim.
14. Tribal, or tribalist, in this sense is not meant in the common Indigenous sense but as a strong, even blind, loyalty to a particular group. Oxford English Dictionary, accessed July 10, 2017, www.oed.com.
15. Langston, *Where Land and Water Meet*, 148–50.
16. Michael J. Dax, *Grizzly West: A Failed Attempt to Reintroduce Grizzly Bears in the Mountain West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), esp. 91–113 for roots of the plan developing and 187–215 for the collapse.
17. Lauret Savoy, *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015), 33–34.
18. Savoy, *Trace*, 47.
19. Hal Herring, "Making Sense of Malheur: Reflections from Inside the Oregon Occupation," *High Country News* 48, no. 5 (March 21, 2016): 20.
20. Julie Turkewitz and Lisa Friedman, "Interior Secretary Proposes Shrinking Four National Monuments," *New York Times*, August 24, 2017, accessed September 5, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/us/bears-ears-utah-monument.html; Juliet Eilperin, "Shrink at Least 4 National Monuments and Modify a Half-Dozen Others, Zinke Tells Trump," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2017, accessed September 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/shrink-at-least-4-national-monuments-and-modify-a-half-dozen-others-zinke-tells-trump/2017/09/17/a0df45cc-9b48-11e7-82e4-f1076f6d6152_story.html. The troubled history of Interior-Native relations in the context of Bears Ears is found briefly in Adam M. Sowards, "The Trump Administration's Review of National Monuments Smacks of Paternalism," *History News Network*, May 28, 2017, accessed July 6, 2017, http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/165999.
21. Williams, *This Hour of Land*, 293 (emphasis added).