



The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1Ukgn3H>

SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

This Land Is Our Land

AUG. 29, 2015

Nicholas Kristof

THE other day, my teenage daughter and I were idly browsing real estate porn, a monument to American inequality: a private island in the Bahamas selling for \$17.9 million; a 900-acre retreat in Washington State for \$11 million; and an 83-acre estate in Colorado for a cool \$100 million.

Then we snapped out of the covetousness, for we had just been enjoying a vacation on even more exclusive property, so valuable that no hedge fund manager could ever afford to buy or rent it.

We had been hiking day after day past pristine mountain lakes, serenaded by the babble of snow-fed streams, greeted by vivid wildflowers in alpine meadows. And it's all my land!

Of course, it's also your land. It's our extraordinary national inheritance, one of the greatest gifts of our ancestors — our public lands.

My daughter and I were backpacking a 210-mile stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail in central California, from Donner Pass to Yosemite. The cost? It was all free.

Most of the time in America, we're surrounded by oppressive inequality, such that the wealthiest 1 percent collectively own substantially more than the bottom 90 percent. One escape from that is America's wild places.

At a time when so much else in America is rationed by price, egalitarianism thrives in the wilderness. On the trail, no one can pull rank on you — except a grizzly bear. (In that case, be very deferential!)

Wilderness trails constitute a rare space in America marked by economic diversity. Lawyers and construction workers get bitten by the same mosquitoes and sip from the same streams; there are none of the usual signals about socioeconomic status, for most hikers are in shorts and a T-shirt, and enveloped by an aroma that would make a skunk queasy.

The wild offers the simplest and cheapest of vacations. My daughter and I unroll our sleeping bags on a \$5 plastic sheet and watch shooting stars until we fall asleep (if it rains we set up a tarp). We carry all our food. And at the end, we sometimes try to hitchhike back to civilization (although drivers mostly speed up when they see me).

Car campers often pay fees. But there are almost never fees for backpackers in the real wilderness. Instead, you pay in sweat and blisters.

In that respect, the wilderness reflects a vision for America that is more democratic than just about any other space in our country.

I can't help thinking that if the American West were discovered today, the most glorious bits would be sold off to the highest bidder. Yosemite might be nothing but weekend homes for Internet tycoons.

Fortunately, America's visionaries back then didn't think that way. People like Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot who helped preserve our wild places were personally wealthy and could afford country estates. But they understood the importance of common ownership of some of America's natural heritage, so that access didn't depend on wealth or breeding.

Their vision reflected a deep belief at the time, among Republicans as well as Democrats, in public services that transcended class. The result was the world's best public school system at the time, networks of public libraries, public parks and

beaches, and later a broad system of public universities and community colleges.

Sadly, that belief in public goods today seems old-fashioned!

My daughter and I are hiking the full Pacific Crest Trail, 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada, in the narrow window in which she's strong enough and I'm not yet decrepit. We've hiked half and hope to finish in another five or six years.

My favorite area this time was the area south of Sonora Pass, a stunning landscape of jagged peaks, snow patches and alpine lakes. We found it more intoxicating than any microbrew.

Then it started hailing on us. Yes, in midsummer balls of ice the size of marbles pelted us, stinging through hats and clothing. Soon the ice turned to rain, the trail to mud — and we were reminded that one of the great things about the wilderness is its capacity to discomfort and humble us.

Most of the time in the 21st century, we dominate our surroundings: We tweak the thermostat and the temperature falls one degree. We push a button and Taylor Swift sings for us. It's the opposite in the wilderness, which teaches us constantly that we are not lords of the universe but rather building blocks of it.

In the best sense, nature puts us in our place. Sometimes with icy toes.

Wilderness offers therapy for the soul as just about the last fully egalitarian place in America. Here we all stand equal — before the bears and the mosquitoes. And there's a lesson here worth emulating for the rest of America.

I invite you to sign up for my free, twice-weekly newsletter. When you do, you'll receive an email about my columns as they're published and other occasional commentary. **Sign up here.**

I also invite you to visit my blog, **On the Ground**. Please also join me on Facebook and Google+, watch my YouTube videos and follow me on Twitter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on August 30, 2015, on page SR9 of the New York edition with the headline: This Land Is Our Land.

© 2015 The New York Times Company