



IF IT'S PRICELESS, DOES IT COUNT?

Decision makers value the wrong things about landscapes

PUBLIC INPUT INVITED. Comments must be substantive and scientific to be considered. Thank you for your interest in this proposal.

As a U.S. Forest Service employee for more than twenty-two years, I heard that refrain all too often. Here's the translation:

If you have an opinion about proposed land development that is based on amenities that can't be bought or sold, then you really have nothing to add.

In the public arena, our sense of place and our relationship with beloved landscapes—which we consider priceless—are handicapped when that “pricelessness” must compete with development, which always brings a good price indeed.

The saying “There's comfort in numbers” takes on a new meaning for bureaucrats evaluating the environmental effects of proposed development. Numbers that measure employment, board feet, and miles of road—real or imagined—have substance in the world of foresters, engineers, and economists. But where is the accounting for the heart of the land, its character, its majesty? The beauty of the natural world and our ability to find solitude and meaning in nature are values that defy a price tag or quantification. Our lack of the right measuring stick, or our inability to create one, should not

relegate these values to insignificance.

We increasingly need the beauty, meaning, and solitude of nature. Desperately. We must ensure that our love of the land, from our backyards to our national forests, is honored and valued appropriately by our government. Our ability to experience the gifts of the natural world will persist only if we have the will and skill to communicate the value of healthy ecosystems.

Yet years ago land managers responsible for development decisions adopted a mantra that effectively has been codified: comments that are not “substantive”—that is, quantifiable—don't count. This was their response to public comments that, to them, seemed emotional and were therefore hard to weigh.

Their—this government's—methods of evaluation fail to acknowledge that so-called emotional responses are often based in social science and economics. Culturally, the beauty of nature has enriched societies; great works of art, music, poetry, and prose inspired by nature rank as hallmarks of civilization. Or, if you must confer a monetary value on beauty, look to real estate. A view of unadulterated lands can double the selling price. And camera manufacturers make millions on the miles of film and billions of pixels devoted to the splendor

of nature and our interactions with it.

Beyond beauty, nature provides context. Stepping out of the built environment, we discover we are part of a dynamic balance that persists through space and time: plants and animals responding to the seasons and interacting within ecosystems. Nature fascinates and rewards us, whether we are admiring the intricate structure of a wild orchid or squinting skyward at the cacophony of snow geese, their migration songs echoing from above low winter clouds. Cherish the memory, relive the experience, tell your children and special friends.

Our sense of place—the sum of our relationships with our lands—cannot be dismissed as maudlin sentimentality. Our desire to leave a legacy of intact, thriving, beautiful ecosystems is part of what it means to be human. If asked to describe people or places that are most important to us, no one starts reeling off rote statistics. We speak from the heart, describing character, experiences, memories, and spirit. When we speak of lands, especially those we collectively own, why should we be silent on that which is most meaningful?

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