

Public Trust

Delivered with some urgency, the new documentary “Public Trust” drills in on threats to a vast but threatened US resource: 640 million acres of public lands and waters – held in trust for the benefit of all Americans. These wild places, mostly in our Western states, are an important part of our national identity, offer solutions to cope with our climate crisis, provide crucial habitat to varied wildlife, and--as a bonus—provide some of the most magnificent landscapes in the world.

“Public Trust,” directed by David Garrett and co-executive produced by Robert Redford, uses as its principal spokesman Montana investigative journalist Hal Herring, who concentrates his vision on three land-based conflicts: the slashing of the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, the possible permanent destruction of the Boundary Waters Wilderness in Minnesota, and the potential sale of one of America’s last great wild places, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The film makes the case for protecting these natural monuments, and how extractive industries, focused firmly on profits and privatization, are trying to deprive future generations of a precious heritage.

Since The Antiquities Act was signed into law over 100 years ago by President Teddy Roosevelt, every president except three (Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush) has used their authority under the Act to protect public lands and waters. And despite our increased polarization on nearly every issue these days, there is currently broad bipartisan support for public spaces. According to recent polls, a majority of Democrats and Republicans think Congress should emphasize conservation on public lands.

Combining the essential history of public land preservation, gorgeous location shooting in the region, and extensive research on the issues, the filmmakers conduct interviews with tribal leaders, government whistleblowers, historians, and journalists (like Herring). Featured in the film are activists defending the land: Angelo Baca Dinè (Navajo), a filmmaker and scholar working to protect Bears Ears; Spencer Shaver, a fierce defender of the Boundary Waters Wilderness where he grew up hunting and fishing, and Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of the Gwich’in Steering Committee, an organization formed to protect Alaska’s ANWR. There is also narratives about government figures tied to oil and gas interests who threaten these resources.

Redford has remarked that “Our country is fortunate to have millions of acres of public lands, including National Parks, Monuments, Wildlife Refuges and Wilderness set aside for future generations,” Redford, but, “sadly, these lands ... are under unprecedented threats from the greed of big corporations... (while) many of our current politicians are also to blame. ‘Public Trust’ tells the story of citizens who are fighting back.”

A prize-winner at a number of recent film festivals, “Public Trust” is available on YouTube beginning on Friday, September 25, one day before National Public Lands Day 2020.

(The film is not rated and runs 96 minutes.)

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