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## **When the Government Owns the Environment**

**by Scott McPherson**

Libertarians maintain that the best way to protect the environment is to keep as much of it in private hands as possible. Without fail, this position is ridiculed by “environmentalists” as utopian and impractical. What they propose instead is a regime of strict government control over wetlands, forestlands, and waterways to ensure that the “pristine” beauty of the wild is kept from human exploitation and destruction.

But can the government be trusted to protect its possessions? It certainly doesn’t take a semester at one of our nation’s many left-wing universities to figure out that, as a Hungarian university professor noted after the fall of communism, “nobody is responsible for protecting and maintaining state property.” And when the government owns the environment, well, you get the idea.

A tragic lesson in government management of the environment was made painfully clear in the December 18 issue of *The Washington Times*, which reported that the Environmental Protection Agency is reconsidering the Army Corps of Engineers policy of dumping toxic pollution into the Potomac River after “a permit from the EPA has for decades allowed the Corps to dump sludge with the consistency of crude oil into the river just miles from the White House.” [Emphasis added.]

The government gave itself permission to dump massive amounts of pollution into one of its own rivers, for decades no less, and it did this, literally, under its own nose. Equally disturbing, by doing so it was apparently violating its own law, the Endangered Species and Clean Water Act. Now it’s being forced to apply for a new permit from itself in order to resume the dumping, which it will surely be able to get from itself one way or the other. Who but a hopeless cynic could believe that the government is a poor steward of the environment?

Strangely, no Corps of Engineers or EPA officials are being dragged before cameras in handcuffs for “betraying the trust of the American people.” No one is pounding his fist in the

halls of Congress calling it “proof” of government’s inability to regulate itself. Nary a word from Greenpeace or the Sierra Club on the failure of public ownership.

Apologists for the government may counter that the EPA is reviewing the terms of the Corps’s permit and will probably reduce the amount of dumping by 99 percent. Sure. After decades of dumping. Close enough for government work.

The only way to protect the environment is through a rigid dedication to property rights. When private individuals or groups, such as the Nature Conservancy, gain title to a chunk of the environment, it is their property and responsibility. They must answer to their shareholders or membership. They have a vested interest in maintaining their investment and in acting promptly to address any concerns about how they are executing their fiduciary duties. They may act fraudulently, but sooner or later — and most likely sooner — they will be found out and pay the price.

Under government control, an alphabet soup of federal agencies bicker for years over the amount of toxic pollution they will deem “appropriate” to dump in a river. When they’re done, the damage is done. Rather than personally face any consequences for their actions, however, these government “executives” apply for a new permit and carry on with business as usual.

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