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Celebration of public land defies Malheur refuge occupation

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Occupiers mocked with snarky monikers such as 'Vanilla ISIS,' 'YeeHawdists'

But taking federal land has direct ramifications for Northern California



Members of Arcata's Environmental Protection Information Center and other groups staged an hour-long occupation of Mike Thompson Wildlife Area near Eureka to protest the seizure of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. Environmental Protection Information Center

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

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The illegal occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge by militant ranchers has roiled the West in an ill-conceived and ugly challenge to federal land management. Out of chaos that has left one person dead and little to celebrate, a surprisingly clear harbinger is emerging:

Most Americans treasure public lands. They are equally passionate about management based on sound, well-researched science.

This is not what the trespassers intended. They seized the eastern Oregon bird refuge to call attention to their claims of government overreach in managing grazing lands. They demanded the return of Malheur and other areas to state ownership and a preselected group of ranchers, basing their ultimatums on a self-serving interpretation of a property clause in the U.S. Constitution.

The swell of public support they envisioned never materialized. Befuddled ranchers drifted in and out, but even those holed up inside the refuge publicly wondered where everyone was.

Instead, the Malheur occupation [inspired](#) ordinary citizens to demonstrate in support of the places held in trust for all people. An hourlong occupation of Mike Thompson Wildlife Area near Eureka was one of many staged in California, Oregon and Washington to celebrate America's public lands system, a visionary network of forests, wetlands and open space.

Armed with binoculars and an ample supply of snacks, the demonstrators at Humboldt County's South Spit brandished signs reading "Birds Not Bullies" and "Keep It Public" as they unleashed a discordant rendition of "This Land is Your Land."

Management isn't perfect in the hands of federal officials, said Tom Wheeler, a spokesman for the Arcata-based Environmental Protection Information Center, one of the demonstration sponsors: "We have our disagreements, and they screw

up.” Still, conservationists and government agents share a deep love of the lands that host rare ecosystems, endangered species, solace and beauty.

Most of the nation mocked the ranchers’ armed takeover, tagging them with such snarky monikers as “Vanilla ISIS” and “YeeHawdists.” Along with the socks and snacks they requested, detractors sent boxes of dildos with an obvious implicit message.

Despite the widespread public scorn, the beliefs impelling the ranchers enjoy disturbing acceptance in some political circles, with direct ramifications for Northern California.

Rep. Greg Walden of Oregon has [proposed](#) transferring 200,000 acres of national forest land to counties and tribes along the Oregon-California border for timber production and economic development. State of Jefferson proponents cite federal “mission creep” in their anti-government screeds, and conspiracy theorists monopolize county boards, obsessing about world-domination agendas and other half-baked harangues.

At least five Western states have adopted [legislation](#) demanding the reassignment of public lands from national to state jurisdictions. And last month, Rep. Rob Bishop of Utah introduced a [bill](#) that would affect 18 million acres of public lands in eastern Utah, downgrading wilderness protections, allowing new gas and oil drilling, and giving his state full ownership of nearly 40,000 acres of federal lands.

So far this erosion of public lands has been a largely civil process. The Malheur takeover was a sinister departure – a tyranny by bullies that violates every tenet of democracy. [Experts](#) say neither the land-transfer legislation nor the Malheur occupiers have a legal leg to stand on, and that prosecution would be an easy win for the government. That, however, does not lessen the outrage over depriving the public access to lands owned in common.

The protesters at Mike Thompson Wildlife Area got it right, if in a deliberately naive way: These lands are our lands, from Lassen Volcanic National Park and Lava Beds National Monument to Mount Shasta Wilderness. Malheur is our wildlife refuge, too.

All 640 million acres of federal public domain lands belong to all of us. They are our great shared heritage, our history and our future. For them to be our legacy,

we must protest legislated transfer and illegal occupation – in song, certainly, but with the resolute goal of keeping public lands forever public.

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