

THE DARK SIDE

A corrupt system of preservation science muzzles the government's own honest scholars. By Alston Chase

Is there a Dark Side? You don't have to be Luke Skywalker to know the answer is "yes."

African Americans are often victims of the Dark Side—the stealth racism that pervades America. Loggers and ranchers encounter the Dark Side when they are driven off the land by the maneuvers of greens and their bureaucratic allies. Corporate and government whistle-blowers meet the Dark Side when they dare to expose their employers' follies.

The Dark Side is silent conspiracy, accomplished with nods, winks and confidential memos, that seeks to harm individuals whose actions are troublesome to the powerful. And it could not exist without the tacit acquiescence of the majority. When it strikes, most folks look the other way.

Many believe in a Dark Side, but selectively. Liberals see it only in big business, conservatives just in government. But some institutions remain above suspicion by nearly everyone. Such is the status of science, which enjoys such a lofty reputation that few challenge its authority.

But science has a Dark Side too, that lurks in the shadowy realm of environmental research. In this fecund habitat it thrives, shielded from exposure to the bright light of truth. But occasionally the covers are pulled back, revealing this netherworld of false scholarship.

Such was the experience of attentive observers at congressional oversight hearings on National Park Service science, held in February. This event revealed that not only is the agency's poor research a national tragedy, but that this failed effort is corrupting the institution of scholarship itself.

The meeting began ordinarily enough. A gentleman from the General Accounting Office testified to what experienced observers already knew: that service science is grossly inadequate. This presenta-

tion was followed by the usual self-aggrandizing testimony of the feds' favored scientists who said, in effect, that if Congress would give them more money everything could be fixed. To this they added a now familiar twist: that parks should be maintained as laboratories for themselves, where they can satisfy their curiosity at taxpayers' expense.

Then the deliberations got interesting. Three scholars testified that the service was allowing overly abundant elk and deer to destroy biodiversity throughout the park system. One of these individuals, Richard Keigley of the Biological Resources Division of the U.S. Geological





Sunset at Everglades National Park, with slash pine in foreground.
PHOTO © BARBARA VON HOFFMAN/TOM STACK & ASSOCIATES.

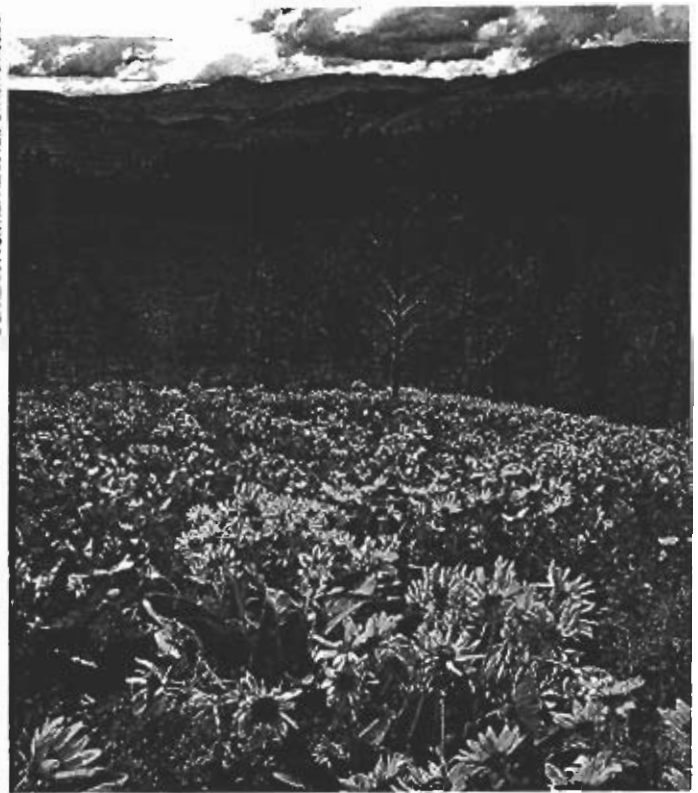
Survey, then added a zinger: His work, he said, is being suppressed by Interior Department authorities.

Fearing elk are eliminating critical vegetation in Yellowstone National Park, Keigley sought to investigate whether this is so. But officials wouldn't let him. They even tried to prevent his testifying at this hearing.

Another witness, Charles Kay from Utah State University, had analogous experiences. He told the congressmen how influential scholars, co-opted by Park Service monies, regularly suppress articles in suppos-

edly "independent" journals that do not support federal management.

This was shocking stuff. Yet many congressmen listening from the dias seemed unmoved. Aside from the few lawmakers hailing from states where the Interior Department is the big bully on the block, few showed curiosity about the plight of Keigley and none of the experiences of Kay. Congressmen from eastern states, in particular, like



monkeys who wanted to hear no evil, refused to believe that the Dark Side Keigley and Kay experienced, could exist.

But it does exist, within virtually every federal agency conducting conservation science. Keigley and Kay are merely the latest victims of the corrupt system of official science that muzzles its own honest scholars and even seeks to ruin the careers of independent professors who oppose it. Whistle-blowers are whistled right out of their agencies, and university professors who dare to question policy find their research funding and opportunities dry up and their own articles rejected by academic journals whose editors are on the government payroll.

Coverup has become the name of the game in federal bureaucracies and even in some university departments. And why is this happening? To prevent the public from learning this simple truth: that U.S. preservation policies rest on a fraudulent, pseudo-scientific hypothesis, and as a result, these policies are failing.

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This policy is called “natural regulation” or “ecosystems management.” It is based on the hypothesis that nature is composed of networks of interconnected parts which interact to keep everything in equilibrium. So long as these systems retain all their members (i.e., sustain their biological diversity), it is supposed, they’ll remain healthy. But if they lose enough parts (i.e., species), their capacity for self-regulation fails and they become unstable.

This hypothesis is popular because it seems to explain what has gone wrong with the environment and how to fix it: Environmental health requires ecosystems to remain in balance—or within “the historic range of variability”—which in turn demands that they retain their biodiversity. And the best way to ensure these conditions is to leave ecosystems alone. Achieving preservation, according to the official policy, is to restore its “missing parts” (i.e., “reintroducing” creatures such as wolves) then “let nature take its course.”

Hence, the aim of federal preservation is to restore habitats that supposedly existed before “ecosystems” were “damaged” by humans. In the federal lexicon, this is called “recreating pre-settlement conditions”—a notion that is written into every federal law and into the

gamut of “ecosystem management” schemes of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and other land management agencies.

And while this may look scientific, it’s actually based on myth. The concept of a stable, self-regulating ecosystem, scientists concede, is fundamentally flawed. There is no “balance of nature.” Original conditions never existed. Rather, landscapes are continually changing, in response to the vagaries of weather, volcanoes, floods, hurricanes and human activities. Random disturbance, not permanence or order, governs nature. Left alone, biological communities do not tend toward equilibrium, but fluctuate dramatically.

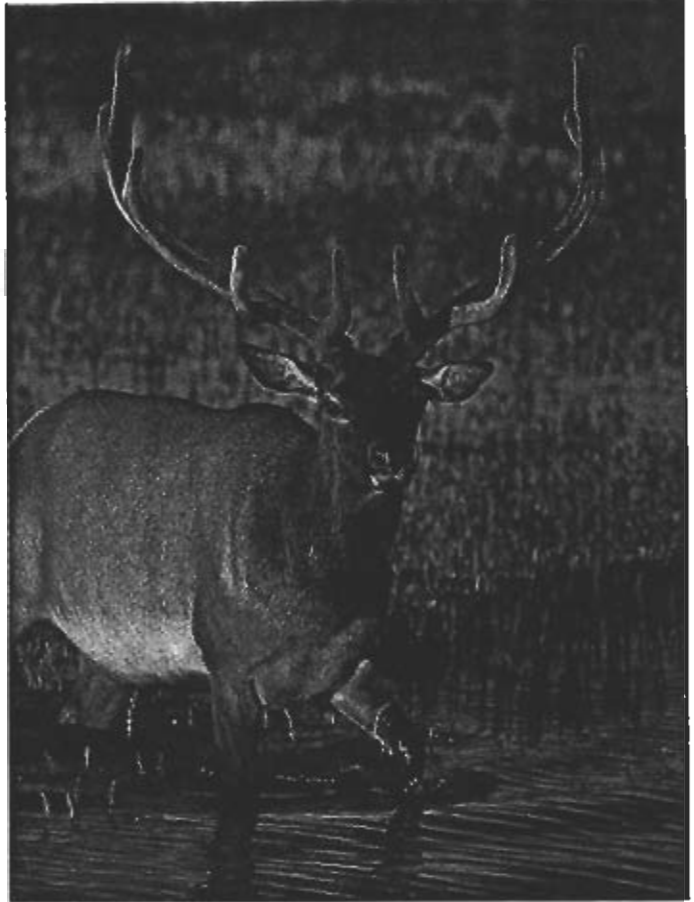
As the prominent ecological historian, Donald Worster explained, “the ecosystem has receded in usefulness, and in their place we have the idea of the lowly ‘patch.’ Nature should be regarded as a landscape of patches, big and little...changing continually through time and space, responding to an unceasing barrage of perturbations.”

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The official science not only ignores this consensus on the declining usefulness of the ecosystem, it also overlooks another critical fact well known to scholars: that rather than a forested Garden of Eden untouched by man, the pre-settlement landscape had been continually and radically altered by humans.

North America wasn’t an “empty continent” when settlers arrived. It was populated by millions of aboriginal peoples who limited wildlife populations through hunting and modified vegetation with fire. As geographer William M. Denevan observed, “the Native American landscape of the early sixteenth century was a humanized landscape almost everywhere. Populations were large, forest composition had been modified, grasslands had been created, wildlife disrupted, and erosion was severe in places. Earthworks, roads, fields, and settlements were ubiquitous.”

In sum, the concept of wilderness is myth. Humans have been altering the Earth for millennia. And the removal of the Indians is bringing about conditions that have not existed since the last ice age. If, therefore, we wish to preserve the landscapes settlers first saw, we must not delegate this management responsibility to nature alone. Instead,



we must replicate Native American stewardship.

As the conservation biologist Jared Diamond explained: "The twin goals of noninterference with nature and of preserving pristine natural habitats are incompatible. Both wildlife managers and conservation biologists are being forced to acknowledge that nature reserves can't be left to nature alone to manage."

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Unfortunately, federal science ignores this scholarly consensus and instead remains wedded to "letting nature take its course." Consequently, it is accelerating extinctions rather than preventing them.

In several western national parks, including Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Rocky Mountain and Mount Rainier, overly abundant elk, no longer hunted by Indians, are destroying vegetation critical to a variety of species, including beaver, bighorn sheep, white-tail and mule deer and even grizzly bears. "Yellowstone," the prominent biologist Daniel Janzen wrote me a few years ago, "is dumfounding...I have not seen worse overgrazing since the 1960s in Costa Rica.... Adding more land to Yellowstone would do absolutely nothing."

Likewise in Yellowstone, bison, no longer facing predation from wolves and Indians, are also eating themselves out of house and home—because rangers have refused to cull the herds. Having severely damaged their range, thousands are leaving the park, invading bordering ranch lands and creating a political circus. Since some of these animals carry brucellosis, a communicable disease causing domestic cattle to abort calves, Montana stockmen are extremely concerned.

But not just western parks suffer from the official doctrine. Natural regulation is triggering ecological calamities across the continent. In many lands and parks, dense deer populations are eliminating countless important plants, including many on the Endangered Species List.

As a prestigious team of scientists wrote in the 1995 book, "Wildlife Policies in the U.S. National Parks," thanks to over-protection white-tailed deer numbers "have increased four- to 10-fold," leading to "resource imbalances." Moose browsing in Isle Royale National Park have reduced the abundance of mountain ash and balsam fir and brought the American yew to "near extinction." Other studies find that

PHOTOS, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Bison at Yellowstone National Park. ▶ Flora, Yellowstone National Park. ▶ American Alligator, Everglades National Park. ▶ Male elk in velvet, Yellowstone National Park.

in Virginia deer have been decimating small mammals and migratory birds such as vireos, warblers and ovenbirds. On Wisconsin's Madeline Island—which University of Wisconsin researcher Don Waller told me is "crawling" with deer—"there is no woody plant regeneration at all. It looks like a clear-cut."

Meanwhile in many national parks, federal officials, in vain efforts to "restore pre-settlement conditions," are spending millions to eliminate so-called "exotics"—i.e., plants and animals introduced by humans. Thus, rangers in Grand Canyon National Park struggled for years to eradicate salt cedar (*Tamarisk*), even though this plant was critical habitat to a rare bird, the Bell's vireo. Yellowstone managers have poisoned brook and rainbow trout introduced into the park nearly a century ago. And the managers of Redwood National Park have tried to exterminate the Port Orford Cedar they deem exotic—even though in national forests just outside that park authorities are seeking to "save" this plant species.

Another step of this "restoration" is the "reintroduction" of "ecosystem missing links" such as wolves. Under the auspices of the Endangered Species Act, millions are spent to plant grey wolves to Yellowstone National Park, even though the original species in this area, *canis lupus irremotis*, went extinct in the 1920s. Likewise, in the Southeastern U.S., the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has expended \$10 million planting so-called "red wolves," despite warnings by the nation's top geneticists that this creature is not a wolf at all but a coyote-wolf hybrid. Similarly the Florida panther, being "reintroduced" to parts of the Southeast, is not a unique species, but in part a descendant of South American wildcats brought to the U.S. as pets.

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These laws and policies, all devoted to the ideal of non-interference, also ignore a fundamental ecological fact: that many creatures need disturbance to survive.



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Fern Canyon, Prairie Creek, Redwoods State Park, Calif.

Left alone, many wild areas eventually become mature forests, which are poor habitat for a variety of species, including many wild flowers, song birds and butterflies. Such creatures require landscapes that are kept open by fire, hurricanes and floods, as well as by human activities such as logging, plowing and road building. Consequently, too much protection spells doom for them. The heath hen—also known as the prairie chicken and a native of the Eastern states—went extinct in the 1920s when its environment, open grassland, was colonized by spreading forests. The endangered Kirtland's warbler needs young stands of jack pine. The Furbish lousewort, an endangered plant, prefers disturbed soils.

But federal preservation science, pursuing mythological ideals of "primeval forests" ignores the needs for these creatures. Rather than promoting open habitats they need, it is obsessed with "restoring" ancient forests that never existed. President Clinton's ecosystem plan for the west slope forests of the Pacific Northwest, for example, would "restore" old-growth forests until they cover 65 percent of the region, even though solid evidence suggests that these mature trees seldom or never comprised more than 45 percent of the forest cover during the last several thousand years.

Consequently throughout the country on public and private lands alike, federal laws promote old growth conditions that are wreaking havoc on creatures that require disturbed habitat. In Mendocino County, Calif., the Lotus blue butterfly has recently become extinct, two scientists reported, apparently because of "a decline in early successional habitat supporting its principal host plant, *Lotus formisissimus*."

In Oregon the Silverspot butterfly, which depends on grasslands, was declared endangered as forests, left undisturbed, increasingly colonized its territory. In New York, the Karner blue butterfly seems headed for extinction for similar reasons. In Texas, Black capped vireos have become endangered, as too much protection destroys its preferred vegetation of oaks, sumacs and shrubbery—conditions which, before European settlement, had been sustained by burning and soil erosion.

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But even though ecosystems management is flawed science, it remains popular, especially within the environmental community and federal agencies. Greens like it because it perpetuates the myth of wilderness. Bureaucrats appreciate its capacity to obscure accountability: when things go wrong, they can blame "nature." And both greens and bureaucrats like the ecosystem concept because it provides a rationale for infi-

nite expansion of wilderness areas. Whenever biota of a sanctuary fail to stabilize, this is taken as proof that to "protect the complete ecosystem" the preserve must be expanded.

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By this point, most readers are probably asking themselves: Why aren't scientists blowing the whistle on this fraud? How can they stand by silently and let bad scholarship undermine preservation? The answer is: the government uses rewards and threats to discourage or squash criticism.

To be sure, federal preservation research was never very good. National Park Service efforts, for example, have been inadequate for decades. As long ago as 1963, a prestigious committee of the National Academy of Sciences lambasted the agency for lacking "competent research scientists." Yet by 1992, the National Research Council found there had been little improvement during the intervening 29 years. And this failure, the council said, "is rooted in the culture of the NPS."

But added to this anti-science tradition is the fact that many governmental and university researchers have been co-opted by perks and grants that public agencies lavish on loyal scholars.

Call it hush money, where researchers receive research privileges in exchange for silence. This way, the science establishment has become another interest group feeding at the public trough, where it exercises considerable influence over what academic papers get published. Professors who accommodate policy makers benefit handsomely from federal largesse and rise to prominent positions in their profession, where they sometimes suppress the views of scholars with whom they disagree. Empowered to help disburse federal millions, they are the gatekeepers of politically correct research.

Such discrimination is what Kay has experienced. As an independent scholar who speaks his mind, he's been blackballed from the U.S. preservation science club so works primarily as an ecological consultant to Parks Canada—an agency that, unlike its American counterparts, recognizes the importance of historical ecology.

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Ecosystems management, therefore, is both a license for neglecting and a motivation for hiding the truth about federal lands. And when co-optation fails to silence critics, authorities resort to coercion.

In my 1986 book, "Playing God in Yellowstone," I told the stories of many who suffered this way, including: Park Service Everglades scientist James Kushlan, who was not permitted to publish the results of his work, showing some ways that hands-off management was failing in Everglades; the eminent Yellowstone grizzly bear scholars, John and Frank Craighead, whose study privileges in Yellowstone were abruptly terminated by the Park Service for objecting to its version of "natural regulation"; and U.S. Fish and Wildlife grizzly bear expert, Robert B. Finley, the Craigheads' successor, who suffered a similar fate.

But as Keigley and Kay's testimony reveals, this coercion continues to be practiced by many federal agencies. Consider: When Douglas Larson, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hydrologist, discovered that leakage from a National Park Service waste treatment plant was contaminating Crater Lake—hitherto one of the purist bodies of water on Earth—he was branded a troublemaker and made unwelcome in the park. Officials, blaming the pollution on outside sources, urged the Engineers to fire Larson. Nothing was done about pollution for 20 years.

In 1992, the distinguished National Park Service geologist James Quinlin, one of the world's leading experts on underground rivers and a resident scholar at Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, was forced to leave the

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environmental groups—the ruination of the lives and livelihoods of ordinary citizens are simply anecdotes. Representative Bruce Vento (D-Minn.) calls them “cockamamie stories.” A San Bernardino environmental activist called them “government by bumper sticker.”

Sometimes it is difficult to find environmentalists who think there is anything wrong with the Endangered Species Act. Or there are those

like Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, who say: “[ESA's] flaws lie in the fact that it is too weak, not too strong.” Journalists are not much better. Writing about the controversy, Charles McCoy, staff reporter of the *Wall Street Journal*, called the takings clause “a snippet of the Fifth Amendment.” I imagine he would object to “freedom of the press” referred to as “a snippet of the First Amendment.” ■

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agency. Quinlan refused a superintendent's order to “research” what he considered “fraudulent.”

In 1993, a member of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team in Yellowstone (who requested anonymity) was severely reprimanded and punished for challenging the accuracy of official pronouncements claiming that the park's grizzly population was increasing, when data clearly showed it declining. Authorities, he told me, erased the hard disk of his computer, took his research data away and began opening his mail.

The same year, Ron Mastrogiuseppe, chief naturalist and forest ecologist in Redwood National Park since 1968, was fired by the National Park Service for such transgressions as criticizing the park's expensive and misguided efforts to “restore” redwood forests in that park.

In 1940 when Joseph Stalin ruled the Soviet Union, he installed a loyal follower, Trofim Denisovich Lysenko, as Director of the Institute of Genetics of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. This in effect made Lysenko ruler of biological sciences for the entire country. The man was actually a quack who touted a spurious doctrine known as “Michurinism”—an hypothesis that denied the mountains of evidence supporting modern evolutionary theory. But since Lysenko had Stalin behind him, his pronouncements reigned supreme. Collective farms were ordered to use Michurian methods, which resulted in massive crop failures, leading to death by starvation of millions. But few dared challenge Lysenko. For those who did were often shipped to the Siberian gulags. Lysenko set back Soviet biology more than three decades.

But today in America, we are in danger of repeating Stalin's mistake. For here too, we have an official science, called natural regulation or ecosystems management. Like Lysenko's ideas, it isn't science and it is failing. And although scholars who disagree with this spurious doctrine aren't sent to labor camps, they often find their reputations assaulted and careers disrupted.

Such affronts to freedom and nature represent the Dark Side of environmental science. And like Lysenko's, it is inflicting grievous wounds on the integrity of science itself.

Such is what the lawmakers glimpsed that day—what is, perhaps, the greatest scientific fraud in American history. Let's hope that now this has been brought to light, Congress and the administration, after decades of indifference, will finally do something about it. ■

Alston Chase is a syndicated columnist from Livingston, Mont. His books, “Playing God In Yellowstone: The Destruction of America's First National Park” and “In a Dark Wood: The Fight Over Forests and the Rising Tyranny of Ecology” are available in major bookstores.

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ON THE COVER: "Watchin' Paddy Ride." Buckeye Blake's painting is of Paddy Ryan, the great Montana bronc rider from the '20s to '40s. This image was used by Arizona Ice Tea for their strawberry banana colada cocktail.

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