

COMMENTARY

Conservation was once a GOP mainstay

Following the airing of a History Channel documentary on Theodore Roosevelt recently, the program's host, Sander Vanocur, posed this question to one of the show's guests, a descendent of the president:

Whatever became of Republican conservatism?

Neither host nor guest had an answer. But it is a good query. Teddy Roosevelt was not only a great Republican leader but also one of the most important conservationists in history. He founded the U.S. Forest Service and established countless national parks and forests. More importantly, he loved and understood the outdoors, plants and animals, and wasn't afraid to take sides on disputes over wildlife management.

Yet today, many view the GOP as the anti-environmental party. What happened?

The answer can be found in Yellowstone National Park. Since its establishment in 1872, this sanctuary has been a symbol of America's preservationist aspirations. It therefore serves as yardstick by which to measure the decline of Republican commitment.

TR loved Yellowstone and visited it several times. He also understood its problems. But his advice went unheeded by the GOP and, ultimately, by both parties. So, now, the park is experiencing an ecological apocalypse, unprecedented in the history of preservation.

The park's overly abundant elk, Roosevelt observed, were destroying the habitat of many other creatures. In response to his urging, in 1915, the game-preservation committee of the Boone and Crockett Club (an organization he co-founded) recommended that elk "should have scientific management. The Committee believe that in addition to those killed by sportsmen, several thousand should be killed (by rangers) each year."



ALSTON CHASE

SYNDICATED
COLUMNIST

But it was mainly Democrats who responded. President Franklin Roosevelt was the first to initiate an elk-culling program. The Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson ad-

ministrations continued such efforts until 1967.

But this policy that TR recommended has since been abandoned. Contemporary leaders pander to a romantic green alternative that Teddy Roosevelt roundly rejected. They refuse to limit elk populations, calling this "interference" with nature.

Consequently, elk have devastated the park. Only remnants of the many other creatures Roosevelt found abundant during his visits — including black and grizzly bears, mountain lions, beaver and mule deer — can be seen there now. Some, such as white-tailed deer, are gone entirely.

Yellowstone has become all symbol and no substance — a Potemkin Village constructed to impress visitors, where the illusion of biodiversity is sustained by myth. It has become a religious shrine to a counterfeit Earth goddess, where opportunistic politicians loudly affirm their faith with puffery.

Just so, this summer, Newt Gingrich led a procession of GOP dignitaries into Yellowstone. The stated mission was "to articulate the Republican message."

But the real idea had developed during a congressional hearing on national park science last February. Among witnesses there was Utah State University professor and Yellowstone expert Charles Kay, who has devoted his life to exposing National Park Service pseudo-science. Since Kay works for neither the federal nor any state government, industry or environmental organization, he is one of the few truly independent ecologists left in America. Not surprisingly, therefore, he has trouble finding work and is often forced to seek employment with Parks Canada, where science remains free.

Kay's testimony on Yellowstone electrified his audience. Several congressmen asked Kay to lead a field trip to the park in August. The scholar agreed.

But almost immediately, politics intervened. Some congressmen asked the Western States Coalition, a group of local lawmakers, to sponsor the trip. And Western States immediately extended the tour to include stops promoting its pro-mining, pro-logging and pro-grazing ideas.

Yellowstone superintendent Mike Finley reportedly insisted on sharing the spotlight with Kay. The scholar's planned presentation was reduced from a field trip to a lecture.

And when Kay met the congressional party in Yellowstone on Aug. 29, he learned that his talk had been canceled altogether. Kay was told that after three days visiting mines, ranches and a national forest, the congressmen were "too tired" to hear him.

Instead, rangers led the Yellowstone tour, feeding our nation's leaders the party line as they passively rode in vans. The next day, Gingrich was seen surrounded by green activists, as Kay sat nearby, alone and ignored.

What happened? Insiders say the White House cut a deal with Gingrich to snub Kay. Whatever, it's clear that the speaker feared this straight-talking scholar, as though he carried the Ebola virus.

That's how far Republicans have fallen since Roosevelt's day: TR tirelessly rode horses and camped outdoors in Yellowstone, loved nature and worshipped truth. Gingrich and his gang travel in buses, are easily tired and fear knowledge. The latters' arrogant culpability is so vast, their willingness to accept lies so limitless, the damage they tolerate so great, and the preservation laws they allow flouted so many, they don't deserve to polish the old Roughrider's boots.

Alston Chase is a nationally syndicated columnist who lives in the Livingston area.

West World

GOP leaders get close look at land issues

By SCOTT McMILLION
Chronicle Staff Writer

OLD FAITHFUL, YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, Wyo. — A vignette in the bus spoke volumes about the Western Legislative Roundup, an event of some controversy that sputtered to a halt here Saturday.

Mary Jensen, the park's assistant superintendent, was speaking into the bus microphone, pointing out that beneath the millions of dead trees left by the fires of 1988 grew many more millions of small trees, thrusting toward the sun.

Rep. Helen Chenoweth, R-Idaho, a staunch conservative, timber advocate and fiery critic of federal bureaucrats, looked out the window.

"It just breaks my heart," Chenoweth said.

Jensen saw the new trees and was pretty excited.

Chenoweth saw the dead ones and it made her sad.

The scene displayed how radically perspectives can differ in the West. And it showed how difficult will be the task of reconciling those differences.

The roundup was the brainchild of the Western States Coalition, a group of state and local lawmakers that brought 15 Republican congressmen, including Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, to the West.

WSC touts itself as a group seeking solu-



ANNE SHERWOOD/CHRONICLE

While Old Faithful sputters in the background, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, discusses the future of Yellowstone National Park with Tom France, left, of the National Wildlife Federation and Mike Clark, right, of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition Saturday morning.

tions, not controversy. Democrats and environmentalists call it a shill for extractive industries.

WSC wanted to teach the lawmakers about land-use issues in the West, according to its executive director and co-founder, Mel Johnson.

"We want them to understand that forest health is a problem," said Johnson. "Mining is a responsible industry. Period. That's what we're trying to get across."

Timber companies pitched in money for the tour of four states and the park. Johnson said. So did mining companies and

lots of individuals. In total, \$200,000 was raised to bring the Republican lawmakers here.

Environmentalists and Democrats set up a howl. The agenda was too one-sided, they complained. Industry had the captive ear of 15 lawmakers and that wasn't fair.

The Republicans, particularly Gingrich, responded and asked for more balanced programs.

A handful of environmentalists were invited to be part of a panel discussion in West Yellowstone Saturday morning. Then, at the last minute, it was cancelled.

So was a slide show and talk by Charles Kay, an adjunct professor at Utah State University who maintains the National Park Service policy of "natural regulation" of elk and bison herds is destroying the northern range and is probably illegal.

"I'd take it (the northern Yellowstone elk herd of about 20,000 animals) down to nothing," he said in an interview. "The lower the population is, the quicker it (the range) is going to recover."

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Speaker meets with neighbor of proposed mine

By SCOTT McMILLION
Chronicle Staff Writer

OLD FAITHFUL, YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, Wyo. — Margaret Reeb, the retired school teacher who has refused to sell her portion of the proposed Crown Butte Mine near Cooke City, met privately Thursday with Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.

They talked about "her concerns as a property owner, that she had been sort of run over," Gingrich said here Saturday.

The meeting took place after Gingrich spent most of Thursday digging for dinosaur bones south of Livingston. Reeb owns about one-third of the mine property,

which is the subject of a proposed federal buyout for \$65 million.

She has maintained she doesn't want to sell. Gingrich met her briefly in a Livingston motel lobby near Reeb's home there. Rep. Rick Hill, R-Mont., arranged the meeting, his staffers said.

The proposed mine is just a few miles from Yellowstone's northeast corner and has drawn intense criticism from environmentalists. President Clinton announced the buyout in the park in August 1996.

However, Congress has not yet approved funding for the project, agreed to by the mining company that leased her property, environmentalists and the federal government, but not by Reeb.

"I think we'll work out something that will save Yellowstone," Gingrich said.

Any solution must involve Hill and Montana's Sen. Conrad Burns, also a Republican, he added. Hill has drafted a bill that would increase Reeb's holdings in one crucial claim in the area as well as transfer 5 million tons of eastern Montana coal from the federal government to the state of Montana and fund the repair and maintenance of the Beartooth Highway.

"The people of Montana need some opportunity to be heard" on the issue, Gingrich said.

Hill has maintained that Montana loses tax and wage money on the buyout and should get something in return.

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Kay was angry that his speech was cancelled. He blamed the Park Service and political pressure from Washington, D.C. He said his data shows "the fundamental premise of the entire environmental movement is flawed" and some people don't want that message aired.

"I'm the only honest scientist," Kay said. "They (the Park Service) have no scientists. They have people with scientific training who act as advocates."

Kay said his goals are not political but scientific.

"I've never voted for a Republican in my life," he said.

Johnson was also chagrined and said there had been "pressure" to cancel Kay and the other presenters Saturday.

"There was definitely some politics," Johnson said. "Where it came from I have no idea."

Park Service officials denied applying any pressure and Rep. Barbara Cubin, R-Wyo., one of the hosts for the tour, denied it vehemently. She said she had asked that the presentations be halted because the remaining Congressmen on the tour — there were eight left by Saturday — were just too tired and wanted an informal day.

Gingrich looked fatigued, but he did huddle over lunch with Mike Clark of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and Tom France of the Montana Wildlife Federation.

Those men said they discussed a variety of issues, ranging from elk and bison management to brucellosis to wolves.

After the lunch, Clark said meeting with Gingrich was helpful but he still felt the trip was unbalanced.

"You can't stick one hour on the

"Everybody has a particular point of view. It's just different particulars."

—Newt Gingrich

end of the tour and say it's balanced," Clark said.

Johnson said several environmental groups had asked for access to the congressmen but they couldn't agree who to send and they hadn't paid for the trip anyway.

"If you want to be a part you have to pay your part," Johnson said he told them.

"Lots of people who helped put the tour together didn't get this kind of access," another WSC staffer said, waving an arm at Gingrich and the environmentalists.

Gingrich said he expected to find a diversity of opinion on the tour, even among people with similar perspectives.

"Everybody has a particular point of view," he said. "It's just different particulars. Put six good conservation biologists in a room and you have at least three good arguments."

Getting divergent interests to listen to each other is the key, he said.

As the tour broke up about noon, the congressmen took off in several directions to take a look at the park. Gingrich and his wife left for Lake Yellowstone, where they planned to spend Sunday relaxing.

Yellowstone Superintendent Mike Finley said he hoped to take Gingrich to see a wolf on Sunday.

But that, he said, depended on the speaker.