

## Privatization threatens an Arizona national forest

Essay - April 27, 2011 [by Kitty Benzar](#)



Once upon a time, the Western public lands -- places like our national forests and parks -- were supported with American tax dollars.

In return, we were welcome to use them. Undeveloped areas required no money to enter, and developed facilities were basic but affordable. Land managers were public servants whose mission was stewardship - or so it seemed.

As in a fairy tale, public lands have fallen under an evil spell. Now the most popular of them sport high-end facilities with prices set to whatever the market will bear. Now, land managers implement business plans while we, the citizen-owners, have been downgraded to mere "customers." Nowadays, even simple access frequently requires payment of a fee.

The latest place to fall under the spell is the Payson Ranger District of Arizona's Tonto National Forest. The district is currently soliciting bids on the for-profit management of virtually all recreation there. The successful bidder will control more than 25 facilities located on your public land and constructed using your tax dollars. And the winning bidder won't even be required to follow the same federal laws as the national forest would have to, if it continued doing its job.

The Forest Service defends recreation fees by claiming that the agency retains the money and uses it to directly benefit the very place you paid to visit. By leasing federally owned recreation facilities to private firms, the agency makes a mockery of that argument. Fees become just another tax, and concessionaires become private tax collectors.

In a prospectus issued in early March, the Payson District began soliciting companies to privatize six family campgrounds, four group sites, a horse campground, an interpretive site, 10 picnic areas and seven trailheads. The prospectus vastly expands the number of fee sites on the district and does so without public involvement or comment. It's a clear attempt to evade federal legal requirements and

prohibitions on where fees can be charged.

What's more, the winning bidder will not be required to honor federally issued recreation passes. The concessionaire will be allowed to issue and sell a pass of its own creation and keep all revenues. Furthermore, the concessionaire will be allowed to charge fees that the national forest is prohibited from charging, including fees just to park your car and gain access to trails and the backcountry.

A law called the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act was supposed to set strict limits on the recreation fees the Forest Service can and cannot charge. But in a feat of hocus-pocus, the agency says it can simply set these limits aside when it surrenders lands to a concessionaire's private control.

The Enhancement Act also requires that any proposed new fee sites must undergo a robust and transparent public process, with final review by a citizen advisory committee. Apparently, that's become too much of a hassle for the agency, because it doesn't always get the needed public support. Land managers on the Payson have chosen to hand over previously free recreation sites to a concessionaire and declare the process exempt from the law.

The Tonto National Forest is attempting to do all this at the Payson District's picnic areas, trailheads and a prehistoric Native American village, even though four of the picnic sites were improved in 2010 with taxpayer dollars. We own these sites, and we just paid to fix them up. Isn't it an outrage that the Forest Service intends to allow a private company to sell us access to our own investment?

The Tonto did not invent this policy, but it is among the worst offenders. There is an America the Beautiful Pass that costs \$80 and allows entry into all national parks for a year. It also covers day-use fees at virtually all Forest Service-operated recreation sites. But it won't get you into the Tonto. For that, you need to upgrade the interagency pass and pay an additional \$15. That makes the Tonto the most expensive federal recreational land in the country. And soon, even your pricey new Tonto Pass won't allow you access to most recreational opportunities on the Payson Ranger District. As for your lifetime Senior or Disabled Pass, both of them will be nearly worthless.

Across the national forest system, creeping privatization has overtaken recreation like the briars that defended Sleeping Beauty's castle. We need more defenders of free access to our public lands, and you don't even need to kiss any frogs to speak out; just email Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell at [RecreationFees@fs.fed.us](mailto:RecreationFees@fs.fed.us) and tell him that federal law applies on all federal land. Otherwise, the concept of public lands is nothing but a fairy tale.

*Kitty Benzar is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org). She runs the Western No-Fee Coalition in Durango, Colorado.*