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# High Country News

For people who care  
about the West

## This land is our land – until it's privatized

by Greg Lewis

It's 6 a.m. on April 8 as I head out for a hike on Mount Lemmon, in Arizona's Coronado National Forest. Today, the temperature in Tucson will break 90 degrees, so I'm looking forward to the cooler, higher elevations.

Passing Rose Canyon, I notice that the campground is still closed. Making a quick decision, I pull into the empty parking area beside the highway. This may be the last opportunity I'll have for several months to enjoy a free, peaceful and uninterrupted walk in these woods.

Back in the 1950s, as a public service, the U.S. Forest Service created Rose Canyon Lake by damming Rose Creek at the place where the canyon narrows into a steep-sided slot. For generations, the lake has provided a tranquil setting for those wishing to spend quiet time enjoying nature, completely free of charge.

But the times they are a-changing, and so is the "public service" role of the Forest Service.

This morning, a gentle breeze sings softly in the tops of towering ponderosa pines. At 7,000 feet above sea level, the air is clean and sweet. I walk past a sprawling picnic pavilion crowded with concrete tables, festooned with banquet-sized cooking grates, and covered by a large metal roof. "Reservations Required to Use This Site," the sign reads. "Contact Reserve America."

Shortly, I pick up meandering Rose Creek. Though it has been a dry winter, there is still a trickle of water, and I find a few shallow pools. By staying near the creek, I mostly avoid the pavement -- lined with 72 developed campsites -- that leads for a mile-and-a-half down to the lake.

By and by, a curve in the road crosses the creek, and just around the bend I spot a large recreational vehicle. The "campground host" is setting up for the season, which starts April 12. An American flag hangs prominently next to the RV, giving the impression that the inhabitant is a representative of the U.S. Forest Service. He is not, however: The Forest Service outsources management of its most popular campgrounds to private concessionaires. This particular campground host works for a Phoenix-based corporation called Recreation Resource Management. Though the company's vehicles and uniforms resemble those of the federal agency, these employees are not the noble forest rangers of days gone by, nor do they own the land they manage. American taxpayers have provided the infrastructure, including the recently completed, six-year renovation at Rose Canyon. In exchange for running the site, the concessionaire collects the profits.

But national forest concessionaires don't honor federal agency passes or follow the same rules that govern the Forest Service when it comes to fees. I notice that the fee booth on Mount Lemmon is closed. That is because the law does not allow the Forest Service to charge visitors for simple access -- for parking and walking through the national forest. But when RRM opens the campground at Rose Canyon, all visitors will have to pay \$10 just to park and walk around the lake. In fact, even if you park along the highway, as I did, RRM will charge you for walking through "their" campground, built with your tax dollars.

It seems shocking to say it, but this privatization of what were once public resources was recently upheld by the Washington, D.C., District Court, in a lawsuit in which I was one of six plaintiffs. We challenged the Coronado and four other national forests' use of concessionaires to evade laws that restrict what fees the agency itself can charge. We lost.

I reach the shore and see, out in the lake, a pair of ducks trailing ripples on its glassy surface. No one else is around on this glorious morning. I'm going to use this quiet time to reflect on what to say in a letter to my congressman. The law that governs fees in national forests is up for renewal or replacement this year, and I believe these fees must be fought, and fought hard.

Only Congress can end the unhealthy alliance that has developed between the Forest Service and its concessionaires. Concessionaires have introduced a profit motive into the management of our national forests, and, as a result, the job of preserving the natural character of Rose Canyon has suffered.

Unfortunately, the Forest Service seems bent on placing its private partners' profitability above public service. The development that, as taxpayers, we all paid for is plain to see. But this summer, when it's 100 degrees in Tucson, you'll only see it if you pay the price of admission.

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