Eviction notice
Access to public lands becoming limited

Sept. 29 was National Public Lands Day, though no one seemed to notice. To mark the occasion, federal land agencies waived entrance and other fees at national parks, national monuments, national forests, etc. But if the day passed without much fanfare, or celebration, it might be because the public often feels little sense of real ownership or involvement in what happens on these lands.

When it suits federal land managers (when they are seeking budget increases, for instance), they like to stress that these are “our” lands. But in terms of how they are actually managed, these are operated as “federal lands,” which are run according to the dictates of agency officials, bound up in rigid and antiquated laws, along with a handful of fringe activist groups that use regulation, protests or lawsuits to set the agenda.

The entrance and user fees that were waived Sept. 29, which began as a “demonstration project” a decade ago, but have now become a fixture, perfectly illustrate the mixed message the feds send on public land. These are our lands, which are supported with our federal tax dollars, but if you actually want to visit them, we’ll nickel and dime you for the privilege. There are reasonable arguments in favor of the fee program, though the premise on which it was based, that the extra charges would help park units and national forests deal with tight budgets and catch up with a maintenance backlog, hasn’t panned out as promised. Agency officials still routinely decry their lack of funding and the backlog is as big, or bigger, than it was a decade ago. But the subtle message the fees sent may have turned off many people.

The effort to end extractive activities on federal lands and overturn multiple-use management on national forests and BLM lands, as epitomized by fights over spotted owls, roadless areas, Bill Clinton’s national monuments and the push for expanded wilderness areas, is just the most obvious sign of the struggle to redefine the meaning of public lands. But it is trickling down to the grassroots in all sorts of ways.

Efforts are under way to greatly restrict off-road vehicle use. That’s not all bad: this form of recreating, like many forms of recreating, can do serious damage if not properly managed. But many public lands exclusionists aren’t interested in coexisting with ORV users; they want them banned, as the relentless push to bar the use of snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park illustrates.
But it doesn’t, and won’t, end there. Even innocuous activities such as Christmas-tree cutting, building makeshift memorials to dead loved ones and the scattering of ashes on federal lands have been called into question, as the exclusionist attitude tightens its grip.

We read Friday that the ability to hold wedding ceremonies in the Maroon Bells wilderness area, near Aspen, is now being contested. The Aspen-Sopris Ranger District rents an amphitheater near Maroon Lake for special events at a rate of $150 for two hours. But a group calling itself Free the Bells is demanding stricter limits on these activities, claiming this reeks too much of “commercializing” the forest.

This is one of the most famous and photographed vistas in Colorado, so the commercialization angle is moot. Wedding parties don’t go there to trash it, but to glory in it, and to mark a beautiful occasion in the most beautiful setting possible. And they pay something for the privilege, which will help the Forest Service maintain the area, even though this is supposedly the public’s land.

But now, along come a group of extremists to keep people out, spoil their fun and treat them as if they were intruders and despoilers who can’t be allowed to tread these sacred lands. It’s outrageous and elitist — but echoes the attitude of other groups that make a profession of trying to dictate how the rest of us use and enjoy these lands.

And federal land managers, rather than telling such groups where to go, walk on eggshells around them, because they fear them or secretly agree with them. That gives these fringe elements tremendous leverage in telling the rest of us what we can do — and, more likely, can’t do — on these lands.

The people are incrementally being evicted from the public lands, at the behest of extremists and elitists. It’s no wonder nobody celebrates Public Lands Day.