

Current Events

How Does the United States Govern Land?

Why Land Matters So Much

Most humans live on land

Most resources are on or in the land

Humans alter the landscape

Most pollution originates on the land

Humans have different priorities for the land

Example: Shane

American Land Policy

How did the United States come to govern the land the way it does?

The Evolution of American Rules for Governing Land

- (1) **Private property rights are the basic unit of for governing the landscape**
(and therefore the environment)

The Problem: How to govern a large land area with few Europeans scattered across it?

The Solution: The American colonies used private property laws and institutions to govern their landscape - private property owners have control over parcels of the environment, but government regulates this control

(2) The national government acquires environment to rule

The Problem: Who claims control of the North American landscape?

The Solution: the United States government uses war and negotiation to secure gain power over the land it now governs

Acquiring land from Britain after the American Revolution

Acquiring land beyond the Mississippi River

The rollback of Indian homelands

(3) the national government organizes, subdivides, and distributes landscape parcels as a commodity

The Problem: Once the United States formally gains power over the landscape, how does it control the landscape – especially European settlement?

The Solution: use the solution that the colonies used: turn it into private property

The United States government creates a bureaucracy to divide up arable land (land that can be farmed) into square parcels, and then sell it (or give it away) to private owners.

But the national government retains control of land that cannot be farmed – The federal government owns 29% of the American landscape.

(4) **The national government organizes its newly acquired landscape into states**

Problem: who will govern the landscape turned over to private owners?

Solution: create new states to join the old states

(5) **States govern the arable landscape.**

Problem: who will govern the landscape on a day to day basis

Solution: let the states govern arable land and its resources,

Timber, fresh water,

and its buried treasure: gold, silver, coal, oil & natural gas, copper, uranium

The Main Consequences of these Basic Rules of Land Policy

States & local government usually have made local, short-term economic growth their top priority in governing land and the environment, in spite of concerns about long term conservation, or preservation, or environmental impact, or environmental justice

Urban & Suburban Land

... is the most intensely used land in most nations

American Land use regulation: Zoning

Urban sprawl

sprawl occurs when the rate at which land is converted to non-agricultural or non-natural uses exceeds the rate of population growth

Is sprawl a problem?

Potential costs:

air & water pollution

loss of natural areas and farmland

water quantity

infrastructure (roads, schools, sewers, electricity)

health?

What Public Policies Contribute to Sprawl?

Housing, Transportation, Special Districts, economic competition among towns

Public Lands

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