

**Bruce Babbitt**  
**Former Secretary of the Interior**

Interviewer-John Howe

OK Bruce, let's start out by talking about the Utah canyon country wilderness. You once described it in a previous interview that we did as one of the most breathtaking landscapes on the planet. Tell me a little about that landscape and why it is important.

Bruce Babbitt

There is a lot of fabulous wilderness on this globe--mountains, rivers, marine areas, but the Colorado plateau is unique because--there just isn't--there are lots of mountains all over the world. They all have their merits, but the geology, the strata, this kind of layer cake formation, and the geology. There isn't anything like it anywhere else. That's it. It's the only place in the world that you can, sort of, see the Earth exposed in such architectural, kind of spiritual form. That's it.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you see as the greatest threats facing wilderness preservation?

Bruce Babbitt

I think the greatest threat to all of the wilderness areas, designated and yet to be designated is sprawling development. The empty spaces in the west are filling up. It's no longer a remote, rural area, these vast urban areas are now coming up all over the west, and either we learn to plan our presence in a compact form, or this kind of sprawling, metastasis of roads and development will just continue to creep outward and kind of ultimately threaten and quite possibly destroy much of what's left.

Interviewer-John Howe

How did the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument come about? How and why was it created?

Bruce Babbitt

Well, this is it's actually an interesting story. As we moved up to the 1996 elections cycle, of course, President Clinton was running for re-election. The President read and understood the language of the environment, but he didn't really hear the music, and it wasn't really on his mind. I think the real motive for Grand Staircase Escalante, in an odd way, came from a pollster named Dick Morris. He was one of Clinton's advisors--zero interest in the environment. I think his idea of an outdoor wilderness was a parking lot with no stripes on it. He really was not into this at all. But he was a great pollster, and he came back to Clinton and his advisors on the eve of that election, and said, "The American people are moving back toward environmental issues, and what you need to do is get on the front page of *The New York Times* with a big, riveting announcement." Now, obviously we were having a lot of difficulty with Congress, so a big announcement couldn't be something that required Congressional approval, and that took us to the Antiquities Act and as Clinton and his staff in the White House, motivated by this pollster, began to look around Grand Staircase Escalante emerged very quickly. There were a lot of other areas in the west, but none so big, and none with such historical resonance. After all, there had

been a proposal, clear back in the 1930's to create a national park here and, so, to meet the requisites of Dick Morris, this pollster, make the front page of *The New York Times*, make it a presidential announcement, that was within the power of the President to do, move up towards something really riveting and big, and at that point the President's staff and advisors came to what I think was the obvious conclusion: Grand Staircase Escalante. That's probably the first time you've heard that because everybody wants to claim credit. OK, well, that's the real story.

Interviewer-John Howe

What is your response to the rural residents who were upset about the creation of Grand Staircase?

Bruce Babbitt

Every conservation decision that has been made in the West for the last hundred and fifty years--the national forests by Teddy Roosevelt, the national parks that were created, all of the great conservation decisions in the New Deal. Every time a president has set aside a conservation area, the reaction from the West has been negative. There's always been controversy, and it's always been kind of a question of the extractive interests--miners, the ranchers, the timber industry, looking at their short-term return and saying, "Our short-term interest is what counts. We're not concerned about the long-range sustainability, or beauty, or what we hand down to future generations". It takes a national perspective, in this case, and in many cases, the President using his or her powers to make these designations. So, the response to Grand Staircase is absolutely in accordance with a precedent in western history. Interestingly enough, the polls showed us at the time, that a majority of people in Utah supported the Grand Staircase designation. It was popular nationally and in the state of Utah. The resistance came from the local area, from the traditional extractive interests. And I might finally add that, if history's any guide, and I think that often it hugely is, in the next generation, in another two or twenty years, you'll go down there and you'll find that the descendents of the objectors saying to visitors, "This was our idea. We love this land," and, "We were present in the creation and it was our idea." Inevitably the opposition changes with time from skepticism to support. It's happened all over the West.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about the oil and gas leases that the Bush Administration did recently. Is that something you would consider proper? What is the right process for something like that?

Bruce Babbitt

The Bush administration, you know, absolutely indifferent to the environmental issues on public lands, had a single focus: energy. Did they have the legal right to issue oil and gas leases? For the most part, yes. Was a good idea? For the most part, no. Should the new Secretary review those leases and consider canceling them? Absolutely, yes. There's a place for energy in the West, but the idea of wholesale leasing, right up to the boundaries of national parks and wilderness areas and sensitive areas in Utah, and elsewhere in the West, is a bad idea, and, I think there will be strong public support for revisiting and canceling many of those leases.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me where the common ground is between wilderness preservation and multiple-use. How do people work together on these issues?

Bruce Babbitt

Wilderness preservation is not compatible with multiple-use. Multiple-use says some lands will be administered for timber extraction, for water development, for mining and grazing, but the wilderness idea is quite the opposite. The wilderness idea says there are some places which speak so directly to the meaning of creation, to the American spirit, to the need for wide open spaces, that other uses should be excluded.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think of clean coal and its development? Is there such a thing as clean coal?

Bruce Babbitt

There's presently no such thing as clean coal. In the ads that you read and the propaganda that you see from the industry advertising clean coal is patently false. Could there be clean coal, that is, coal which does not further accelerate global warming by discharging carbon dioxide into the atmosphere? It may be possible in the future. There's a lot of research underway now on what's known as carbon capture and storage. It's a very complex technological idea, to say that you can actually-- you know, most of that stuff coming out of stacks is carbon dioxide and the question is, can you filter that out, convert it to a concentrated gas or liquid and inject it into geological strata? Perhaps. We're not there yet, and in the meantime, I think the imperative is quite clear, and that is, we must, in any event, move away from all fossil fuels--oil, gas and coal, toward alternative forms of renewable and clean energy.

Interviewer-John Howe

How has the Colorado River changed since the days of John Wesley Powell?

Bruce Babbitt

Well, the Colorado River is not the Colorado River of John Wesley Powell. It's been damned and diverted to the point that, you know, it no longer reaches the ocean. You go down to the delta and it's a giant salt flat. We have used and re-used the Colorado River to exhaustion.

Interviewer-John Howe

What kind of affect did Glen Canyon Dam have on the ecological balance of the Colorado?

Bruce Babbitt

Well, bear in mind that Glen Canyon is one of many major dams on the Colorado River coming upstream from Hoover and all the dams in Arizona up to Blue Mesa and Gunnison, and all the rivers of Colorado. It is another dam on the river. It happened to be in a pretty spiritually and scenically important place. I guess if you were to ask me, I would say that's true of all the dams on the Colorado River.

Interviewer-John Howe

What effect did it have on the vegetation and the aquatic life of the river below Glen Canyon?

Bruce Babbitt

We used to think that dams just had sort of upstream effects in terms of inundating the landscape. It's only more recently we've come to understand that by altering the hydrology of a river there are huge downstream effects, depending on your point of view, for better or for worse. I mean, the greatest rainbow trout fishery in all of the southwest is below Navajo Dam on the San Juan in New Mexico now as a result of colder, clearer trout waters are coming out from a rather silt-laden river which is being slowed down and changed as it flows into the dam. The problem with Glen Canyon is that that effect had really deleterious effects on Grand Canyon. The native fish adapted to warm water, or, in a struggle for existence; the beaches have disappeared. The beaches were deposited, obviously, by a river, one with high silt content and one that could flood and deposit those beaches in high water, so yeah, Grand Canyon is a less diverse, and a more impoverished landscape as a result of Glen Canyon.

Interviewer-John Howe

Switch gears again, and we'll talk about wolves in Yellowstone. How did that come about on your watch, and why is that important?

Bruce Babbitt

The wolf in Yellowstone is a statement about the need for large predators on landscapes, and the way in which the top predators, whether it's a wolf here, or a jaguar in South America, or a tiger in India--control as kind of a keystone species, all of the other species on the landscape, whether it's other mammals, whether it's food that other mammals rely on in the food chain, whether it is the trees and shrubs on the landscape. Yellowstone is particularly important because it is kind of the premiere wildlife park on the continent, and it was perfectly clear that it was out of balance. I mean, these massive herds of elk just devastating the landscape, stripping the streams of aspens and willow, effects cascading outward to destruction of the beaver population, the disappearance of songbirds, the proliferation of coyotes, which were not controlled by predation. The landscape was terribly out of balance, and the--I think the importance of wolf restoration was--it was really kind of the first time that we had said as a matter of public policy, the landscape is big enough to actually restore predators...top predators. It's kind of a, really interesting kind of change in public perception. It's not enough just to say we're going to leave the landscape alone. You need to leave the residents on the landscape alone and, where they've disappeared, put them back. I think also the Yellowstone wolf was a statement about multiple-use. It was a statement that says, there's room for grazing on the western landscape, but ranchers do not have a right to cleanse the landscape of all other forms of wildlife that, in any way, interfere with cattle and sheep, and the tremendous controversy over that was really Wildlife vs. Ranchers, and ranchers saying the landscape has got to be sterilized for our benefit. And finally, a clear consensus statement from the American people, from the, you know, public response. Now, the public lands are there for public values and a complete ecosystem with top predators as one of those values.

Interviewer-John Howe

Is delisting the wolf and grizzly a good idea? Maybe you can talk a little bit about the importance of the Endangered Species Act.

Bruce Babbitt

The Endangered Species Act is a powerful statement about the importance of bio-diversity. It is a statement that, I think, reflects an ethical obligation that we have to live on the landscape without destroying creation, and that--I think it's a hopeful statement that we can arrange our presence on the landscape to respect creation and to keep it intact. Now, precisely how that's carried out in a given time or place or species, is a pretty complex issue. The wolf has done very well. Wolves have no trouble reproducing. I mean, there's no Viagra problem there. They're out on the landscape, and you get them out there, and they really do reproduce. Now, in some circumstances, it's perfectly appropriate to remove direct federal administration under the Endangered Species Act. That's being done, for example, in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and it's appropriate because the states have come around to accepting their responsibility to manage the wolves in a reasonable way and maintain their presence on the landscape. Whether or not the states in the Rocky Mountain West are at that point is a fairly close question. My own personal feeling is that in Montana, Wyoming, Yellowstone, it would be premature to lift the federal presence under the Endangered Species Act.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk a little bit about wild horses and the issues with wild horses in the West. What should be done in that situation?

Bruce Babbitt

Wild horses are a complicated problem. Number one, they were not here pre-settlement. There were no wild horses on the American landscape. In deep geologic time, yes, but in the course of the last couple of millennia--several thousand years--no horses were on the American landscape until they were introduced by the Spaniards and picked up by the Plains tribes and adopted and adapted into the Plains Indian cultures in a really remarkable way. So, you start the wild horse issue by recognizing that they are not a natural part of the Holocene, geologic landscape. From that, I think it's important to recognize that this is a management issue. You can't just say, "We're restoring horses," because you're restoring something that wasn't there in the first place. Now, horses are like all grazing animals, whether it's elk or deer, or whatever. But, you have a population issue, and the question with wild horses is, in the absence of seeing them in the context of the natural landscape, what restraints are there on proliferation? There's no question we have too many wild horses on the Nevada landscape, but I'm a, I'm a horse lover. But I've got to see the facts out there. These landscapes out there are being absolutely devastated by lack of any natural constraints on the size of the horse populations. So it's a management issue, and we've got to get in close and try to find acceptable ways that will have the support of the American people to recognize that reality.

Interviewer-John Howe

Let's talk about the public lands just a little bit. Who owns the public lands, and who should have the say as to how they are managed? Should it be local residents, or should it be the citizens of the country?

Bruce Babbitt

The American people are the owners of the public lands, wherever located, whether in my home state of Arizona, or Utah, or wherever, they are public, and that means American public. And in

the final analysis, history teaches us that the proper conservation of public lands has to begin with strong federal administration. All of the past experiments and crusades to turn the public lands over to the states, I think have been failures, and I think they would be a failure today because the conservation ethic is strongest in the nation as a whole and the lands belong to all of us. Now, exactly how federal ownership and federal standards translate down into local management, I think is something we can all talk about. And surely the West is changing. It has a much stronger conservation ethic now than there was fifty years ago, and certainly much stronger than there was one hundred years ago. Why? Because the West is urbanizing. The West is now full of people who see that the wide open landscapes are under a lot of pressure and that we really do need to have strong conservation standards. So I think that the discussion from here forward will be not about no federal presence. That's a given. The American people support that. But how do you translate federal ownership and management into a kind of collaborative, interactive kind of management with local communities who, after all, do have a direct interest and have some important insights from the fact that they live on the land.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you see for the future of the wilderness in the west? What do you think is going happen over the next decade, or twenty years?

Bruce Babbitt

The Wilderness Act was a spectacular innovation and piece of legislation, and we now have a huge wilderness system throughout the United States, but particularly in the West. It needs expansion, and I think what we're seeing in the West now is wilderness expansion which is being driven by local support. There's been kind of a shift. Back in the 1960's I think wilderness tended to be drawn on maps by environmental organizations in Washington D.C and I think that phase is kind of reached a kind of gridlock, but what you see now is somewhat more carefully crafted wilderness proposals that are coming from states and from local communities, and that's really good. It fits my notion that conservation now is getting rooted in the West. There's more of a balance of national and local interest, so I'm quite optimistic that we will see the wilderness system gradually expanded, and areas consolidated and laid out on larger landscapes, and that that process will be perhaps a lot less contentious than it has been in the past.

Interviewer-John Howe

As you know, the Green River is up for wild and scenic river status. Tell me about that. What do you think about the Green and its ability to achieve that?

Bruce Babbitt

Oh, I think rivers are increasingly popular candidates for designation, whether that designation comes in the form of inclusion within a wilderness area, within a national monument, or by wild and scenic designations. There are many pathways toward the common goal, which is river protection. It's an enormously popular issue. I think as we see climate change coming on, as water becomes more scarce, as we see the water wars, not just in the West, but, you know, between Georgia and Alabama and Florida-- all over the country. The people are, the American public is saying, "We understand that rivers are under a lot of stress. We are really concerned about their recreational potential," so we are going to see, I think, considerable support and motion on river designation, river protection.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you say to critics of global warming?

Bruce Babbitt

You're wrong.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why?

Bruce Babbitt

Its happening.

Interviewer-John Howe

What's wrong with the critics who just don't believe the signs?

Bruce Babbitt

Global warming is now an established reality. There is an unshakable science consensus, and we're beginning to see a particularly in the American west, where the impacts of climate change are going to be perhaps more server than elsewhere. I think the models now suggested in the Colorado Plateau and the southwest, we are going to see intensifying drought throughout the Rocky Mountains and, particularly, the Sierra Nevada. We're going to see a huge impact on the winter snowpack. Most people don't think about it, but the snowpack in the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada is really the ultimate form of water storage. They are the natural reservoirs that are most important to the way we live because the snow stacks up all winter, melts when water use for agriculture is not high in the west, and then gradually melt and begin to flow down the steams in spring and summer, exactly as the demand increases from air conditioning, from agriculture and all of the other things. So, the snow packs really are an important part of regulating the way we use water. As they disappear, and we have nothing but rain in the winter, we're going to have a huge readjustment, because we don't have storage capacity for these huge floods that will come down, not just in the summer, but in the winter as a result of rainfall. So, we've got a big adjustment period ahead of us and it makes all the more urgent the case for containing climate change through limiting the use of fossil fuels and moving toward legislation, the kind that's now being proposed in Congress to cap and trade, and begin ratcheting down the use of fossil fuels.