

Editorials...

Nature Conservancy endorsement rescinded

Some time ago in this space, we offered an endorsement of the efforts of a group called the Nature Conservancy. Our observations during the past couple of years have convinced us we should rescind that endorsement.

Nature Conservancy is a private group that uses donations it solicits to protect and preserve natural-resource sites it deems worthy of preservation.

When we voiced words of praise for the group more than two years ago, we were given to understand its mission was to pursue environmental conservation through techniques that employed — and preserved — private property rights.

An example of this technique that was cited when we praised the organization was the way a ranch in Ruby Valley was acquired by Nature Conservancy during foreclosure proceedings under terms that were aimed at keeping the property in private ownership and in production. Shortly after that transaction was accomplished, however, the group applied a drastically different technique on a neighboring ranch.

The second tactic resulted in more than 3,000 acres of land being transferred out of private ownership and into state ownership.

Our experience has convinced us government ownership of land is an unmitigated mistake; and we were disappointed to learn that Nature Conservancy agents had been a party to a scheme for committing such a blunder.

Since that incident, we have followed the operations of Nature Conservancy with a cautious eye; and we have determined this process of extinguishing private property rights by transferring the property to government ownership has been occurring with increasing frequency in Nature Conservancy transactions. What might have been excused as an exception to the rule in the Ruby Valley arrangements now seems to us to have become the rule for Nature Conservancy projects.

Back then, the stated purpose of the group was to locate property that had environmental qualities thought to be worth protecting and to acquire such property (with the donated funds) under circumstances that would keep it in private ownership and afford the preservation desired with techniques such as "conservation easements." It was an approach that allowed for the protection and preservation of both natural resources and private property rights.

The more recent approach, involving the transfer of valuable property to collective ownership is the approach that has been so thoroughly discredited by experience in Eastern Europe. In that region of the world, the socialist notion of collective ownership was applied to the fullest extent — and the experiment has yielded environmental disaster.

We believe the leadership of Nature Conservancy has adopted this same misguided notion as it transfers water rights and land from private ownership to government control. It has done this not only in Ruby Valley, but also near Fallon in western Nevada and in several other states.

Because the organization now is operating to extinguish property rights — rather than utilizing these as a technique for conserving natural resources — we believe its agents are performing a disservice to the public and therefore are unworthy of donations from private citizens.—M