Marion Clawson's Long View of the Land

When Marion Clawson died this past April at the age of ninety-two, RFF and the world lost a provocative thinker, known for his pragmatic approach to public land policy—as well as for his cantankerous brand of charm. Clawson was among the first generation of RFF research fellows, joining the staff in 1955, just a few years after the first Ford Foundation grant to the organization. He set a standard—and perhaps a record—for the study of agriculture, park and forest use, outdoor recreation, and land development that spanned seventy years. His interest in the land seems only natural, considering that he was born in Nevada in 1905 and raised on ranches and in small towns in that state.

Over his long career, Clawson was able to observe how we Americans have sparred and shifted in our emphasis and influence over the nature and purpose of national forests, national parks, and wildlife refuges. Methods he developed to measure the demand for and value of outdoor recreation have formed the basis of several hundred studies throughout the world. A doer as well as a thinker, he directed studies of irrigation development out West for the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Agricultural Economics in the 1930s and '40s and then ran the Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management in the late 1940s and early '50s before coming to RFF.

Clawson was a prolific writer, at one point, publishing twenty books in twenty years, including the widely read *Economics of Outdoor Recreation* (1966) and *Forests for Whom and for What?*(1975), not to mention *Uncle Sam's Acres* (1951) and *Federal Lands: Their Use and Management* (1957), which are classics on public lands history and administration.

Those who encountered Clawson in person could expect to hear opinions expressed with no nonsense and sometimes a tart tongue. Probably no one was more outspoken on forest policy than he was when economist Robert G. Healy and land use planner William E. Shands interviewed him for the *Journal of Forestry* in 1989. Excerpts from that interview, and from another that appeared in *Resources* in 1995, help explain why he has been called

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a "bull elephant" and a "true giant," if not necessarily in that order.

In his conversation with Healy and Shands—and in his book *The Federal Lands Revisited* (1983)—Marion noted some striking changes in public attitudes in the thirty-six years that had passed since he directed BLM. An enormous increase, he said, had taken place in the number of people concerned about public land and the environmental problems associated with forest harvesting, insecticide use, and water pollution on those lands. He noted, too, a rise in widespread technical knowledge, and with it a new aggressiveness in advocating how public land should be used. The trained expert may still command respect, "but not deference." Along with this heightened public interest, he said, was a rise in the sense of proprietorship among people with no direct legal claims to the land.

"If you propose to tear down a structure in a city that somebody else claims has historic value," he told the journal, "you learn something about what property rights are and aren't. A large number of people will try to prevent you from doing it, people who are exercising some interest in land which they don't own, have no thought of owning, which they don't even pay taxes on, and yet they think they have some rights concerning it."

When he directed BLM, the situation was very different. Few people besides ranchers "paid any attention to us." He could not remember a single lawsuit brought against the agency during the six years that he was director. Now, however, if BLM doesn't "have a new lawsuit filed against them every month, they think they're slipping."

> If you go back one hundred years or more, there was the concept of absolute ownership, from the center of the earth to the zenith of the sky. … And sure, we were subject to laws of nuisance: If I did something on my land that impinged on you, you could sue me. But it was hard to bring suits and it was expensive. The chances of winning were not good, and settlements usually amounted to nothing or very little. It was about as near an unconstrained use of private land as one could imagine. And the pendulum has swung.… Now I

wouldn't say things have been perfect in their application.… But nevertheless there has been a great rising trend of public control over private lands.

When *Resources* interviewed him six years later, Marion elaborated on what he called an "era of confrontation" between land users and federal agencies brought about in part by greatly increased distrust of government and more competition for land use. (Users seemed to be saying, "Whatever those SOBs in that agency say, it ain't so, and we'll oppose it.") Yet he saw the confrontation as something that the federal government itself could diffuse. And he remained firm in his belief that federal ownership of public land is here to stay. The idea of turning much of it over to the states was "utter nonsense." At the same time, however, he favored a second look at how federal lands are managed and urged the Forest Service, for example, to "define what ecosystem management means," so that it isn't just "more rhetoric" rather than "operating procedure."

He tended to sympathize with the notion of compensating private landowners when the federal government limits the use that they can make of their property for the public good. The whole field of property rights, he said, needs some re-examination. "The distinction between private lands that are under public control and public lands that are used privately and subject to all kinds of influences—it is not as sharp as it once was. Now there is a continuum, not a sharp break."

In some ways of course, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Wildlife management is one example, as he pointed out. Striking a balance between the National Park Service's mandates for recreation and preservation is a dilemma that is as old as the service itself.

Regardless of the inevitable differences of opinion on public land issues, Clawson urged us not to lose sight of the fact that "we have done pretty well" over time. The nation's renewable resource situation is much better, he said, than it was in the early part of the century when he was growing up. We are providing for far higher levels of consumption. The "real revolutionaries of the last half century," he maintained, have been the agricultural scientists. "Our land is producing far more per unit of area than it was ten years ago, thirty years ago, fifty years ago. . . . You know, Mr. Malthus is standing on his head over there in the corner." As for timberland, the acreage has not increased, in fact it has decreased slightly, and yet the volume of wood has increased greatly over the years. "We certainly have begun to grow timber in a much better way than we once did."

Meanwhile, he argued, the scars on the environment are not worse than they were at the turn of the century. "Of course, it's a *non sequitur* to jump from that and say everything is perfect, just wonderful, no criticism allowed."

The Sagebrush Sage: Marion Clawson (1905–1998)

In RFF President Paul R. Portney's estimation, Marion Clawson did more than most of us could do in a millenium. "He was a phenomenally productive scholar, a fine civil servant, and a skilled research administrator."

Clawson authored some forty books, twenty-three of them for RFF. He served the departments of Agriculture and Interior for a combined twenty-three years. In shorter but nonetheless potent bursts of time and energy, he advised foreign countries such as Chile, India, Israel, Pakistan, and Venezuela on agricultural economic issues, working through the United Nations and the Rockefeller and Ford foundations. He taught at the University of California–Berkeley, the University of Washington, and Duke University.

He received his own education at the University of Nevada, where he earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in agriculture. Later he earned a Ph.D. in economics from Harvard.

He was, in the words of Senior Fellow Roger A. Sedjo, a "big man who had a big life" even before arriving at RFF, which he served in a number of executive capacities, including a term as acting president. He was senior fellow emeritus at the time of his death.

Clawson was also "big" as a person, Sedjo adds. "Marion was always positive and upbeat. He didn't have time for petty bickering. He often resolved disputes by simply outworking the opposition."

Speaking of work, at the age of ninety-two Clawson was still driving into his office at RFF once a week. He shrugged off his son's reminder that cabs were available to take him through the morning rush hour. "I know there are taxis," Clawson reportedly responded. "And when I need a taxi, I will take a taxi." Apparently, he never did.

Contributions to the Marion Clawson Memorial Fund c/o RFF will honor Clawson's memory and support research in his areas of professional interest.