

HIS VIEW: Larry Craig's war on the West's wild charms

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Brock

Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, quietly left office last month after 28 years in Congress. Nobody talks about Craig much these days, probably because everyone is too embarrassed by the tawdry circumstances of his departure.

This isn't the forum to rehash details of his guilty plea in a homosexual sex scandal in the Minneapolis airport. Nor is it the place to share some of the gags that late-night television comics made about his mandate, his layover or his blowhard oration.

Here's what counts: Starting in 1980, Idaho voters sent Craig to the U.S. House of Representatives for five successive terms. After that, they elected him to three terms in the U.S. Senate. Only William Borah, who died in office more than 69 years ago, served Idaho longer in federal office.

Here's something else that counts: During his tenure, Craig probably was the Senate's greatest advocate for people who believe that public lands owe them a living. He wasn't the top performer in every category, but he always finished in the money.

- He wasn't the Senate's No. 1 fixer for the logging industry, a distinction that probably goes to former Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska. Even so, Craig deserves a bronze medal.
- He wasn't the Senate's biggest friend to cattle ranchers on public lands, a title that goes to former Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M. Though he wasn't the champ, Craig was a major player in the grazing sweepstakes.
- He wasn't the Senate's premier patron for irrigators and other high-volume water users, a constituency that has been braying for - and receiving - federal subsidy for more than 100 years. No one senator has primacy over water issues, but Craig was as good as any and better than most.
- He does earn top honors for service to mining corporations and their mission to wring private profits from public lands. In particular, his legerdemain in an effort to revise the General Mining Law of 1872 was a swell example of serving the interests of a few at the expense of the many.

Add it all up, and Craig probably steered more of Uncle Sam's natural resources into private hands than any other senator in the last 20 years.

Given this, it's unlikely that his legacy will be honored with a Larry Craig Wilderness Area. But anyone who owns a mining corporation, or a cattle ranch, or - and I mean this sincerely - a logging operation should be saddened that Craig has left the Capitol building.

Everyone else who likes to hunt, fish and camp on public lands should applaud his departure. The sad truth is that, given the chance, Craig would side with extractive industry every time in its quest to squeeze money from your favorite forest, river or picnic spot.

Questions about natural resource use often boil down to "jobs" versus "environment," but this simplistic framing is a false choice. Timber can be cut, and minerals can be extracted from America's public lands. What's needed is balance, which means the intrinsic value of wild country must be recognized and respected. Economic considerations cannot be the sole driver of natural resource exploitation.

Consistently siding with workers' interests over nature's interests may be a great strategy for winning votes, but it is a terrible way to preserve the wild charms of a state such as Idaho. As a Cree Indian proverb puts it: "When the last tree has been cut down, and the last river poisoned, and the last fish caught, only then will we realize that we cannot eat our money."

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of a major daily newspaper in southern Idaho. In that capacity, he conducted many interviews with former Sen. Craig.