



Trump's Department of Interior Prioritizes Extractive Industries, Systematically Dismantling Environmental Protections

—Abby Boglioli and Andi Voigt, Researchers
—Jeff Simmons, Faculty Advisor

Professor Jeff Simmons, who has been working in various capacities at Syracuse University since 1990, has found it useful to create writing assignments that encourage students to investigate truth in media. Working with *Project Censored*, a publication that investigates the necessity of a free press, Simmons and his students have been creating pieces for publication for the past seven years. In this piece, Syracuse University students Abby Boglioli and Andi Voigt worked with Jeff to explore the failure of the Trump administration to prioritize environmental protection. In reflecting on the experience, Simmons writes: “I began using *Project Censored* as a topic of inquiry around eight years ago. It seemed to me to lend itself to the department’s evolving focus on genre as rhetorical situation. After that, I began offering a “wild card” for the Unit 3 assignment, where students could unearth their own “validated independent news stories” and submit them. It is a great chance for students to experience seeing their work published online, often experiencing along the way what it is like to have one’s beloved work edited. I wasn’t surprised that there were very few edits in Andi and Abby’s piece.”

Katherine Benedetto, a senior advisor for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) under President Trump’s Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke “scheduled roughly twice as many meetings with mining and fossil-fuel representatives as with environmental groups, public records requests have revealed.” According to Jimmy Tobias, writing for *The Guardian*, “many of these meetings were followed by official decisions that benefited the private companies or trade groups in question, as in the case of Twin Metals Minnesota, a company that has long sought to build a copper and nickel mine near the famed Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota.”

At the end of Barack Obama’s presidency, his administration did not renew Twin Metals Minnesota’s lease on land connected

to the BWCA, opting instead to review the necessity of mines in that protected area. In December 2017, Twin Metals Minnesota proposed the mine and, in the same month, the Trump administration granted access to part of the area. This directly contradicts BLM’s mission statement: “The Bureau of Land Management’s mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

This prioritization of corporate interests over environmental concerns is not an isolated incident. “Evidence suggests that [Ryan Zinke] has used his public office, and taxpayer dollars, for private gain on multiple occasions,” and he has “dutifully and actively worked to hollow out the [Department of the Interior] to make it easier for his industry sponsors to operate

on public lands,” reports Joel Clement for *The Guardian*. For example, Ryan Zinke recently “reassigned” Dan Wenk, the superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, to Washington, D.C. George Ochenski, reporting for *The Missoulian*, suggests that the reason for this reassignment has “everything to do with bison, grizzly bears, wolves and science—and implementing the Trump administration’s priorities of placing special extractive interests over the nation’s rarest wildlife resources.” Wenk, a 43-year respected veteran of the National Park Service, announced that he preferred to resign. Wenk had been a vocal critic of the Interagency Bison Management which claimed that Yellowstone’s “carrying capacity” for bison should be capped at 3,000. He spoke out against “delisting grizzly bears or wolves from Endangered Species Act protections in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem” and strongly opposed reinstating the practice of hunting them in the park’s surrounding states of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana.”

The problematic leadership under Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is consistently revealed in independent media. Ben Lefebvre and Nick Juliano reporting for *Politico* demonstrate links between Zinke and Halliburton, one of the world’s largest oil field service companies. “A group funded by David Lesar, the Halliburton chairman, is planning a large commercial development on a former industrial site near the center of Zinke’s hometown of Whitefish, a resort area that has grown increasingly popular with wealthy tourists. The development would include a hotel and retail shops. There also would be a microbrewery—a business first proposed in 2012 by Ryan Zinke and for which he lobbied town officials for half a decade.”

In 2014, Lesar, along with his wife Sheryl, donated more than \$10,000 to Zinke’s first House campaign.

While independent media consistently demonstrates links between corporate interests and changes in the Department of Interior Policy, corporate news sources direct the focus onto Trump himself. The *New York Times* published an opinion piece that opposed mining in the protected Boundary Waters, but that story did not receive significant coverage. *The Washington Post* offered similar coverage, with just one article that skimmed the surface of what is happening to the BWCA. Without directing more attention to how the government is hurting nationally protected lands by neglecting to acknowledge the biomes that are affected by mining, corporate media will not be able to fully cover the issue at hand.

Works Cited

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